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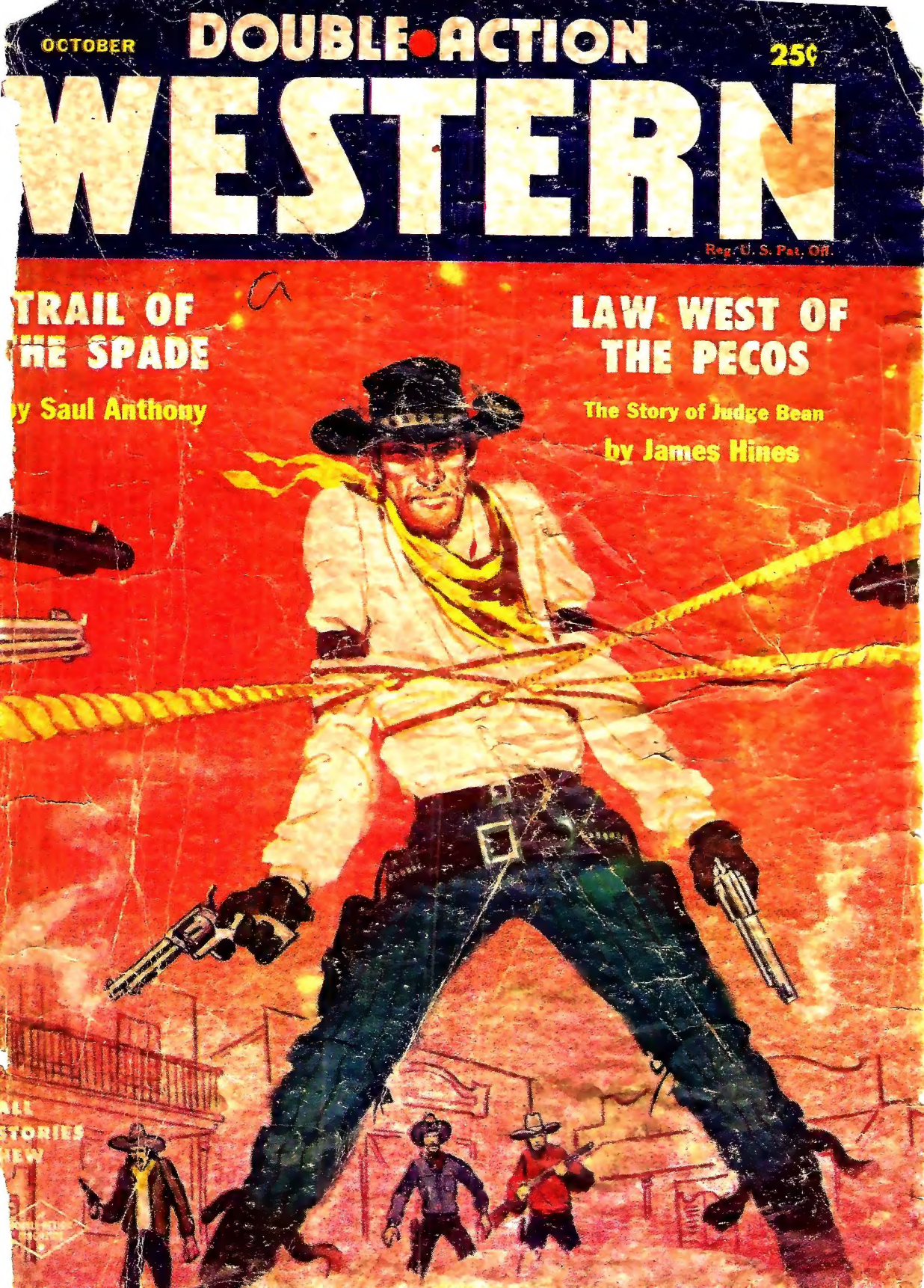

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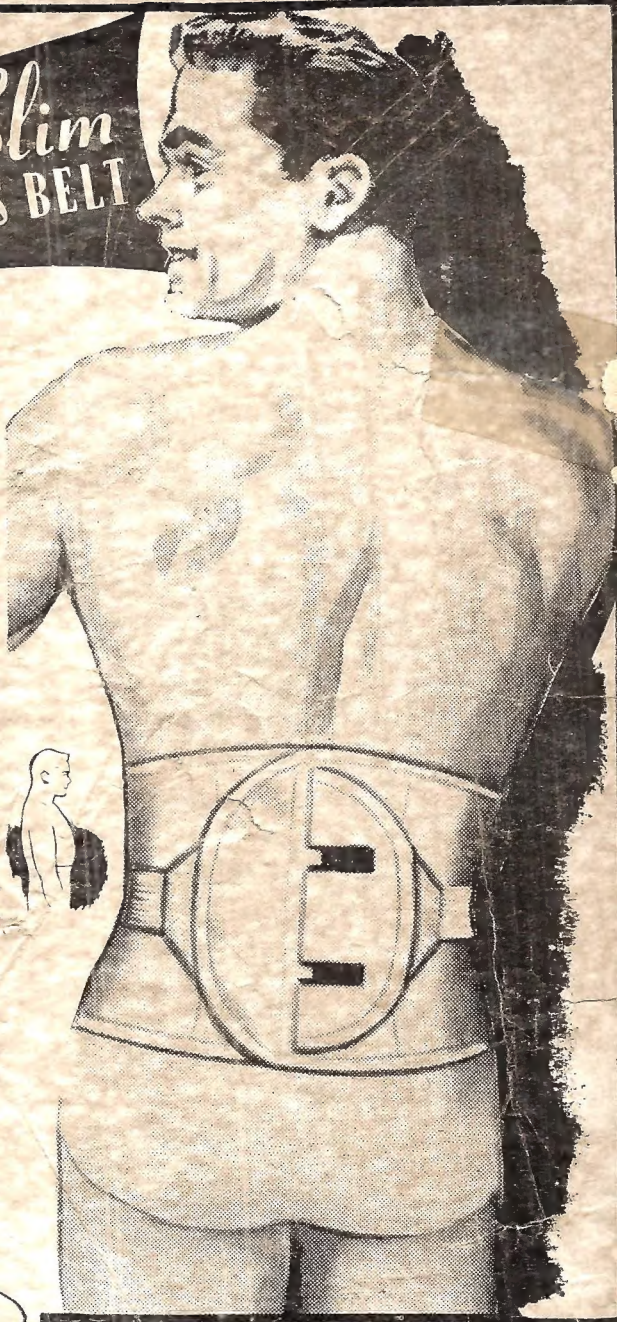

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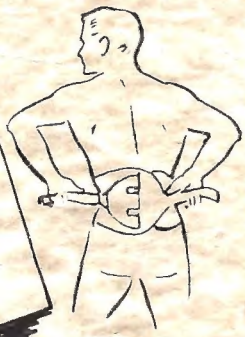

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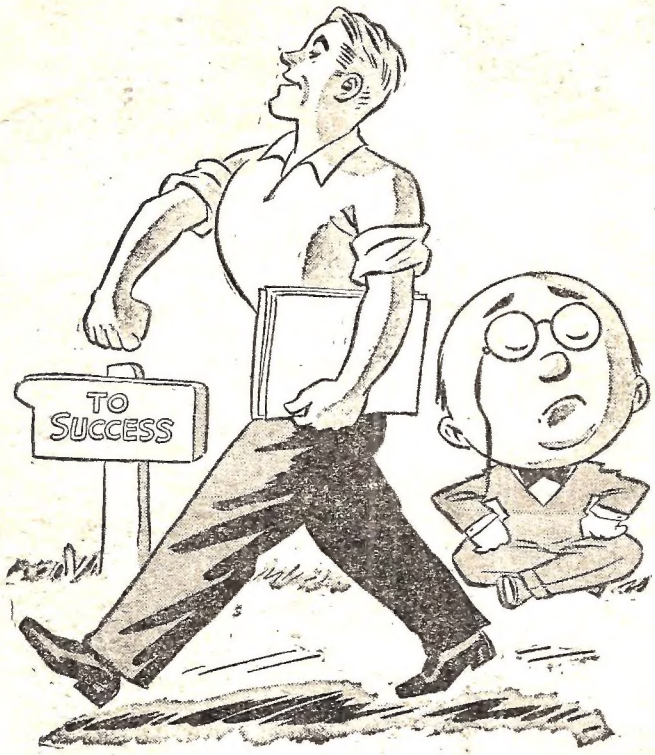

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Volume 24 October, 1956 Number 1

Featured Novel

TRAIL OF THE SPADE

by Saul Anthony 6

A playing card, in the spade suit, was the membership ticket in the Spade gang, and the higher the card, the higher the rank of he who carried it. So the one to seek was whomever held the Ace of Spades...

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ROBERT W. LOWNDES, *Editor* WILL LUTON, *Art Director*
MARIE ANTOINETTE PARK, *Asso. Ed.* CLIFF CAMPBELL, *Asso. Ed.*

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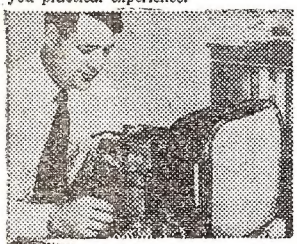

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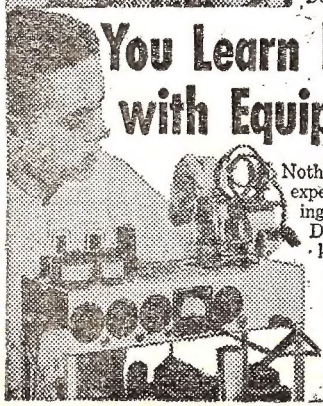

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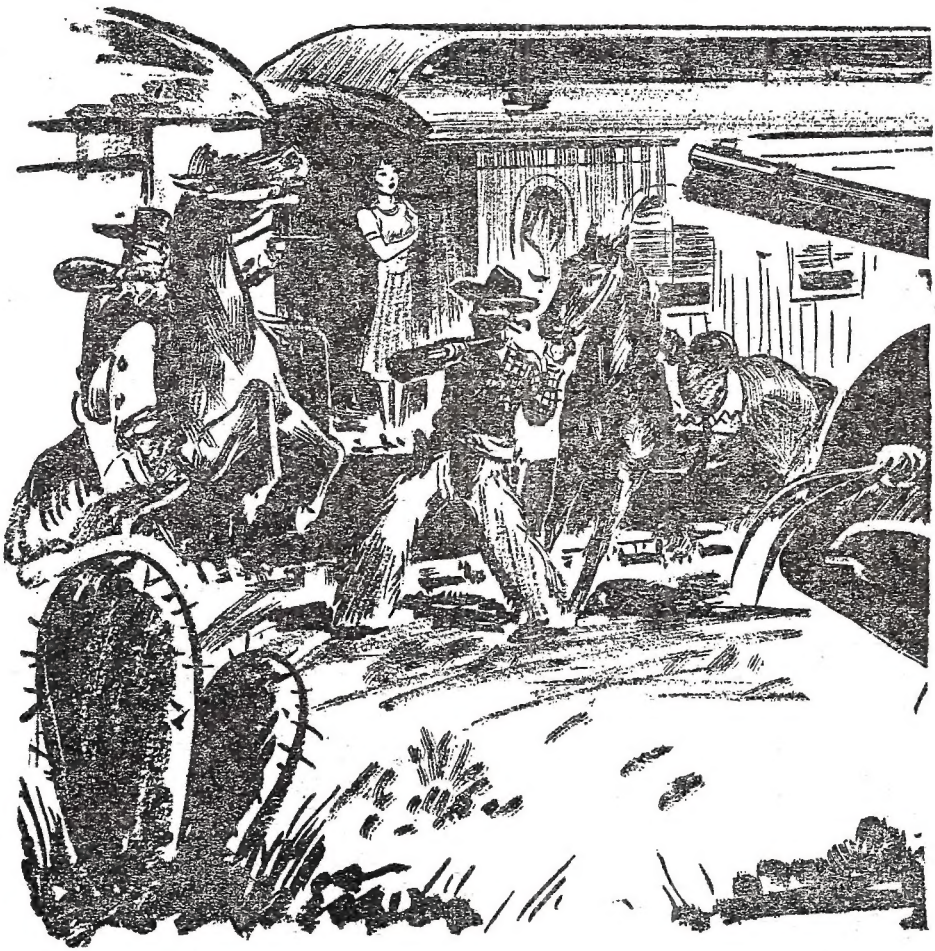
TRAIL OF THE SPADE

Featured Novel of Cowtown Mystery

by SAUL ANTHONY



A suit of playing cards was the only clue to the identity of the sinister Spade gang — and it's leader was the person who left an Ace of Spades at the scene of particular crimes. And somewhere in the riddle was the question of why the Goldbar jail was so leaky...

The Spade gang went in for all kinds of banditry...

THE TIME of the morning was a few minutes after six o'clock when Thad Norse pulled the golden stallion to a halt on the rise at the outskirts of Goldbar to gaze at the tense and dramatic scene below him. The tall, well-built hombre with the twin .45's swinging from his hips took a red bandanna from the pocket of his dark jeans and wiped the sweat from the inside of his black sombrero.

About fifteen yards along the trail

a crowd of men, all without mounts, was grouped about a figure which was sitting astride a bay horse beneath the limb of a dead tree. There was a rope about the rider's neck and one end was fastened to the butt of the tree.

"You bunch of cowards! You drunken fools! It must take a lot of nerve for a dozen armed men to take the law into their own hands while the Sheriff is miles out of town and the victim is helpless. Give him a gun. There's not a man amongst you who would dare face Cal in a fair fight."

The anger-filled voice swung Thad's gaze to the left of the man who was sitting calmly on his mount, despite the fact that he was very close to boot-hill. Thad's eyes narrowed. Held firmly by two burly, grinning men was a red-headed woman who struggled desperately and wildly as her eyes blazed at the crowd as the words tumbled from her mouth. Slim and lovely, despite the wild disorder of her hair and the torn blouse which revealed her shapely shoulder, she kicked at the shins of the men who held her.

"Take her away," a voice said in the crowd. "It's not going ter be a purty sight. Hurry, we've wasted enough time already."

"No, wait." The cry from the girl was no longer anger-filled; it was full of pleading. "He's entitled to a fair trial. Please...put him back in the cell and let the law take its course. If you go ahead with this, you'll be sorry after the heat of the excitement dies off."

"The law!" A voice yelled loudly from the crowd. "The law of Goldbar is too damn slow acting. Ter hell with the law. String 'im up. It's about time we took the law into our own hands. Cal Hester is as guilty as hell, we know that. Why waste time?"

The man on the bay lifted his battered and bloody face and his words were spoken bitterly. "This is a big day for you, isn't it, Duke Warren? You've been itching for revenge ever since I gave you that gunwhipping for cheating with the cards. This is your day, Duke."

"Yer're loco, Hester," the man addressed as Duke said surlily. "This is not a personal matter. I'm a law-abiding citizen who wants nothing but to see justice carried out." He raised his voice. "What are we waiting fer, fellers? We've got one of the Spade's gang in our hands."

At his words, a low ominous sound passed over the crowd and it surged forward as one man. Thad, moving the stallion quietly forward, recognised that sound for what it really was; the low, blood-thirsty murmur of decent men who were stirred up by whisky and the heat of the moment.

"She's all set," a man standing near the bay's head said. "Who's going to strike the nag. Perhaps Duke...?"

"The first hombre to touch that nag, dies." Those drawled words, so unexpected, caused the crowd to whirl with amazement. Taken completely by surprise, it parted to leave a gap for the narrow eyed stranger who rode the golden stallion down the laneway of human flesh to halt and turn his mount by a slight pressure of his knees, his twin .45's moving in a slow, deadly circle, his cold, grey eyes seeming to select each and every man for a hot-lead target. Even the two men holding the girl finally released her and moved into the crowd.

"All right," Norse drawled. "The party's over. As the little lady suggested, the prisoner goes back into his cell to await a fair trial."

But the advantage of surprise had worn off. That low ominous sound passed over the crowd again and the men at the back moved forward, pushing those ahead of them.

"He's only one against twelve," Warren shouted. "Are we going ter let him interfere with justice? You all know how slow the law of Goldbar is. If we don't make our own law, we'll have every two-bit killer in Texas

swarming here. Let's make an example of Hester. If we don't do something like that, we'll have homes and families broken up. And why? Just because we were too damn soft with the lawbreakers."

THEY WERE strong words, and the rising muttering which issued from a dozen throats was an ugly sound. Grimly, Thad tried to think of some other way besides the use of his .45's to break up the angry crowd. He knew that most of the men under his weapons were decent citizens driven on by anger and desperation. The thought of having to turn his .45's on decent men caused him real regret. He realised that he would have to reveal the badge of the Texas Rangers which was on his shirt beneath the leather vest. Slowly, he tightened his elbow against his side and began to move the elbow backward, drawing back the vest front.

But he didn't complete the movement. On the edge of the crowd, Warren made a play for his hardware and Thad had to move his right hand slightly to combat that flashing draw. Duke's .45 was just clearing the top of its holster when the weapon in the ranger's hand spat flame and lead and Warren's smokepole was torn from his hand; the would-be killer uttered a cry of pain as he staggered backward nursing his shattered and bleeding fingers.

Thad swung the round bore of his .45 back beside its mate and his voice, though still a drawl, had a cutting edge to it. "Anyone else has the same idea? All right, break it up. I intend to take the prisoner back to his cell even if I have to use every slug in these smokepoles. You're twelve to one, but common sense will tell you that I'll drill a few of you before you get me. Now, who's going to be first?"

"It was one against twelve," a voice snapped from the crowd which parted before a charging figure which finally halted beside the stallion. The speaker, a short, plump woman, snapped a double-barrelled shotgun to her shoulder and pointed the weapon into the crowd.

"Old Betsy here can speak mighty convincingly when she likes." The woman patted the stock of the weapon with her left hand and then swung the muzzles directly on the man closest to her.

"All right, Biff. Give Judy back her smokepole. Be quick or I'll scatter your inside all over the range."

Without a word, Biff carried out the order and the lovely girl who had been standing near the bay stepped forward with the sixshooter in her hand. The ranger knew by the rocklike steadiness of Judy's hand that she knew how to handle that weapon.

"Now, you bunch of fangless rattlesnakes, it's three against twelve." The shotgun pressed tighter against the plump shoulder. "And old Besty is damn near splitting her sides with dust. I'm sure hankering to clean that dust out of her muzzles. Now, you hombres in front there. I'm going to give you just five seconds to get out of here." The loud voice drew a smile from Thad despite the mounting tension.

"Now, Ma Keller," someone shouted. "You wouldn't turn your hell-iron on decent citizens, would you?"

"You're damn shooting, I would, Jack Hill," Ma Keller replied as she stretched her neck to look into the crowd. "You make a wrong move and I'll let the daylights into every dark corner of your body. Now get going, every blanky blank one of you. Young Hester's going to get a fair deal if I have to gut-shoot every man of you."

MA MADE a mistake when she mentioned Hester. Thad felt the anger return to the crowd, and that low murmur rose again. Thad tightened his lips and his .45's moved steadily over the men's heads, his eyes watching for any movements of gunhands.

Ma Keller realised her mistake, too. Her old eyes narrowed, and for a moment she seemed at a loss as to what to do next, but quickly she recovered her calmness and stepped forward. "All right, you coyotes, time's up. In just one second I'm going to make widows of all your mares as well as your wives. Those of you who managed to kid a woman into marrying you, I mean." She gave a funny little hop and then leant weakly on the muzzle of the shotgun. "Oh, me poor back. I do believe I've broken it."

A low snicker came from the crowd and Thad and Judy lifted their voices in laughter. The snickers turned into a solid roar of laughter and the tension left the crowd as it relaxed. Slowly, with wide grins on their lips, the men turned hastily and started talking to one another in low voices. Then, breaking up into small groups of two's and three's, the men who had been so set on a neck-tie party a few moments before, slowly drifted away.

Thad returned his weapons to their holsters and faced the two women. "That was close." He smiled at Ma Keller. "You did the trick, mam. That crowd was about ready to call my bluff."

"You may as well call me Ma," the plump woman replied. "Everyone else does." She turned. "And this beautiful filly is Judy Hester, the sister of the man who would have been treated to a necktie party if you hadn't happened along. She can handle a nag and a smokepole as well as any hombre; even if I do say so myself, she's the prettiest filly in the whole of Texas. And you can thank her for me being here. She threatened to come alone if I wouldn't come with her."

Judy blushed as she held out a small, warm hand. "Thanks for taking a hand, stranger."

"Norse, Miss Judy. Thad Norse." He grinned. "And I agree with Ma. But I'm sure that there's a better word than pretty."

"Waal, how about telling it to her later?" the hombre on the bay horse said ironically. "This nag is becoming restless, and this damn noose about my neck is none too comfortable."

The twinkle left Thad's eyes and without a word he turned and slipped the rope from about Cal's neck. Reaching out, he caught the bay's reins and turned his own mount about.

Judy stepped forward. "Where are you taking my brother?"

"Back to his cell, Mam."

"But you mustn't take him back there. He wouldn't have a chance."

"Sorry, Miss Judy. But Cal will have to go back and stand trial."

"Turn him loose, stranger." Judy lifted her hand and the revolver was held in a direct line with the ranger's chest. "Cal's not guilty, but if he stands trial, they'll hang him."

"He's right, Judy. There's not a damn thing he can do but take me back to the cell. Anyway, I'm not running," Hester said firmly.

"If you run away now," Thad drawled, "you'll be running the rest of your life." Without another glance at the .45 in Judy's hand, he urged the stallion forward.

- 2 -

SOME OF the citizens were still hanging about when the ranger led his prisoner down the dusty street and halted in front of a false-fronted building with the word "Sheriff" in large, black letters across its front.

Although there was really nothing humorous about it, Thad Norse grinned as he looked at the shattered and smashed pieces of timber which had been once a solid door. Kicking aside the pieces, he took his prisoner down a short corridor until he came

to the iron cages which acted as cells. There were five cells in all. Two on each side of the corridor and one at its end. But the one on the left, the first one, would require a new door before it could be put into use again. It was now a twisted, useless mass of iron which leant against the bars of the cell.

"It looks as though you'll have to move into another cell," Thad drawled. "Now, if the Sheriff has left one of these unlocked...? Yes, here we are." He grinned as the prisoner entered the cell and stood with his face pressed against the bars. "Not much better, but it's a cell."

Cal Hester returned the ranger's steady gaze. "Thanks for taking a hand back there. I was mighty lucky you happened along—Ranger." Cal placed a lot of emphasis on that last word.

The ranger's face did reveal a flicker of surprise. Slowly, he leant forward and placed his hands on the bars. "How did you know?"

It was the prisoner's turn to grin. "I saw the badge when you reached up to take the hemp from about my neck. That's why I agreed that the only thing you could do was fetch me back to the cell. With a ranger in Goldbar, I feel a lot better. Say, the ranger force is a mite slow, isn't it?"

"What do you mean, hombre?" Thad raised his eyebrows.

"Hell, ranger, I've lost count of the letters I've written to Captain Fay asking him to send a ranger to Goldbar. And even when one does turn up he doesn't let me know he's here. Hell, Norse, I'm the hombre who's been yelling ranger for months."

"You're making a stampede out of a quietly-grazing herd. Remember, I haven't had time to let you know who I am."

"You wouldn't have told me. I know how you rangers work, Norse."

THAD TURNED and walked into the Sheriff's office and returned with a chair. He placed it close to the cell and sat in it. "I'm just a wandering cowhand, Cal; remember that. Now, let's hear what you have to tell me."

"I haven't much to—"

"What the heck goes on in here?" The deep, gruff voice rose above the sound of quick footsteps, and Thad, his eyes on the door, watched the thick, burly hombre wearing a Sheriff's badge enter the corridor.

"Who the devil are you, feller?" The Sheriff shot the question at Thad and moved forward to stand, legs wide, his fingers hanging, claw-like above the butts of his sixshooters. With his eyes snapping from the ranger to the prisoner, he moved slightly aside to make room for the second man who stepped forward, a Deputy badge on the front of his vest.

"All right, hombre. How did Hester get in that cell?" The Sheriff growled.

The ranger swung his eyes quickly away from the Deputy, and his drawl was slow and easy. "I put him there, Sheriff. Seems as though the citizens of this town think that the law is too slow. They were just about to treat your prisoner to a necktie party when I came along." Thad threw another swift glance at the Deputy, and then returned the Sheriff's angry stare. "That cell wouldn't hold a new-born calf."

"Yer're new about here, feller," the Sheriff growled. "Who are yer and just whar do yer come from?"

"Name's Thad Norse, and I hail from over there." The Ranger moved his right arm in a complete circle.

"A wanderer, eh?" The Sheriff felt in his pocket and drew out a bunch of keys. "Travelling through?"

"Maybe. But I've taken a hankering to this town, Sheriff."

"What sort of work do yer fancy, Norse?" The Sheriff's words were short and crisp.

"None at the moment, Sheriff. Just want to be left alone." The ranger's eyes were just slits.

"Purty closed-mouthed, ain't yer, stranger? Afraid yer might let something slip? Wal, Norse, yer can be too damn careful, yer know."

"Sure, Sheriff. But seems to me that you could be a mite more careful, too." Thad was grinning, but the same emotion didn't reveal itself in his eyes.

"Meaning just what?" The Sheriff didn't look at Thad. He bent over and inserted a key in the lock of the door.

Norse stood up and leant against the bars. "When a lawman rides out of town leaving his prisoner in a hostile town without any deputy to guard him, wal, I'd call that plumb carelessness."

The Sheriff didn't answer. Unlocking the cell door, he stepped aside. "All right, Hester. Get up."

Cal Hester winked at the ranger and then moved lazily across the floor. "Don't tell me that you're going to turn me free after all, lawman?"

"I'm putting yer in another cell, Hester. The window bars of this cell are loose and I don't want yer to escape."

Thad threw the lawman a swift glance, opened his mouth to say something, altered his mind and stretched lazily. Without a word, he stood there and watched the Sheriff move the prisoner into another cell, and he grinned when the lawman turned and snapped, "Want something, stranger?"

"Nope," Thad drawled. "Figger I'll go tend my horse and hunt up a place to bed down tonight."

Hester's voice followed the ranger. "When you're ready for some chow, stranger, drop into the Miners' Haven. The food that Judy and Ma serve will make your mouth water."

AFTER THAD left the Sheriff's office, he mounted the stallion and rode slowly up the street until he found the usual town corral. Leaving the stallion in the hands of the old, friendly hombre, he looked the town over. There were five saloons, and they were doing lively business judging by the sounds which came from behind the swing doors.

But Thad was in no mood for entertainment. At the Red Steer Hotel, he booked into a room and threw himself, fully dressed on to the bed. And it was almost three o'clock before he left the room to have a bath before moving down to the bar.

The long bar was crowded at that time of the day despite the fact that the miners were still out in their diggings. Most of the bar was taken up by the usual barflies which every western town has to support. But there were other people in the room, too. Cowboys rubbed shoulders with the black-coated gamblers and painted dance-hall girls who were waiting for the miners to come in with their hard-earned cash.

As though the ranger's appearance was a signal, one of the girls jumped on to the bar and lifted her voice in song. Norse grinned. The tune of the song was familiar, but the words were new to him. Apparently, the girl was making up her own words as she went along.

And she could sing. The crowd yelled for more, but she smiled and shook her dark head. Jumping from the bar, she pushed her way to a door at the rear.

But she was back ten minutes later. Smiling, she moved across to Thad and linked her arm through his. "Buy me a drink, stranger," she said softly.

The ranger returned the smile, but gently he freed his arm and tossed a dollar on to the bar. "Help yourself, ma'm," he drawled and turned away.

But he had taken just the one step when he paused, his eyes narrowing.

Standing a few feet in front of him was Duke Warren. One hand was bandaged, but the other was hanging close to the butt of the .45 on his left hip, and his blood-shot eyes were ugly above the thin slit of a mouth.

The dance-hall girl touched the ranger's arm, and his drawled, "Get

out of line, you little fool," though low and almost lazy, made her stiffen and move hastily away. But as she stepped backward, Thad felt a slight tug at his right holster. Like a striking snake, his hand dipped downward—and touched his empty holster.

The girl had cunningly disarmed him of his right .45.

THE RANGER silenced a curse as out of the corner of his eyes, he saw the girl move to a chair across the room, the .45 dangling frm her fingers.

Norse's lips twisted in a cold smile. To rob a two-gun man of one of his weapons was one sure way of slowing his speed. When the downward flashing hands struck one full holster and one empty one, the unexpected change frustrated the gunslinger and slowed the speed of his draw. The difference in time might not be more than a couple of seconds, but in a gunfight even a split second can mean the difference between life and death.

But for the plot to be really successful, the victim had to be unaware of the missing weapon until his fingers searched for it. If the girl's touch had been a little lighter. Thad would have been at a disadvantage instead of being ready.

The ranger was aware of this, so was Warren. His face paled a little and for the first time fear was lurking in with the anger in his eyes, but his voice was still a snarl.

"We're about on equal terms now, Norse. We both have one smokepole each."

Thad sounded weary, a little bitter perhaps. "Why carry the grudge any further, Warren? Go home and sober up."

But the look of the killer was in Duke's eyes now. His lips twisted in an ugly sneer. "Yer blew me right hand to hell, Norse. I'll never sling another iron with it, and fer that I'm going ter kill yer."

"You're a fool, Warren. Don't try it." Again that bitter, weary note of regret.

Those words only edged Duke on. "Make yer draw, skunk." Even as he spoke, Warren's hand was a flashing streak of brown as it went holsterward.

But it was just a waste of effort on Duke's part. He didn't even squeeze the trigger. Thad didn't seem to be in a hurry. That's what the onlookers said after the fight. They said that Thad didn't move a hand toward his holster. They claimed that the weapon just jumped into the stranger's hand and spoke its piece. They also claimed that any other hombre would have killed Duke Warren. But Norse didn't; he swung the round bore of his weapon out of line with Duke's forehead just before squeezing the trigger. The heavy slug made a mess of the killer's other hand.

And the ranger's voice rose clear and brittle above the murmur of voices, and Duke's cries of pain. "That's better than killing you, Warren. If all killers like you didn't have gunhands, then other hombres could hang up their guns. Now get. And be out of town before dark."

Duke didn't have to be told twice. Still cursing, he pushed his way through the crowd which had surged forward again.

Thad turned, too. He walked across the room toward the girl who still had his .45 in her hand. She saw him coming and moved hastily towards the door, but he overtook her and turned her savagely, taking the weapon from her hand.

"Don't stranger," she said swiftly; "don't hurt me. I was only earning a few dollars."

"At the risk of my life," he drawled angrily. "Don't ever try that again. Next time I'll forget that you're supposed to be a woman."

"Let her go, Norse." A voice snapped behind Thad. "I don't allow any hombre to manhandle my girls."

The ranger turned as though he had all the time in the world. "Chips Allen," he drawled, gazing at the tall, red-headed man who stood with one handless arm hanging at his side, the other hand ready for a quick dive for his left sixshooter. "Let's not lock horns again, fellow."

"You're mighty handy at shooting at gunhands, ain't you, Norse?" Allen snapped. "Well, remember this. My left hand is twice as fast as my right one used to be. I'm going to kill you some day, hombre, but the time's not yet. But remember this, too. I happen to own this joint, so keep your hands off my girls. I won't have them manhandled—even by you." Without giving Thad a chance to reply Chips Allen turned away.

Thad glanced about for the girl, but she had quickly disappeared.

- 3 -

WHEN THAD walked into the Miners' Haven and took a chair at one of the small, neat tables in the center of the room, Judy Hester, lovely and cool in a blue dress, was serving at another table to the left. Looking up, she saw the ranger and moved over toward him, a polite smile on her curved lips.

Norse grinned at her.

"Cal recommended the food you serve here, so I'm taking his word for it, despite the fact that you're his sister."

The polite smile became friendly and warm. "Cal and I run this eating-house, but it is Ma Keller who does the cooking, so if you have any complaints after you've tasted the food, take it to Ma."

The ranger's grin spread. "After seeing Ma in action, I don't think I'll complain, no matter how bad the food is."

Judy laughed. Thad liked the sound of her laughter. It was free and easy with a soft musical quality running through it. He liked the sound of her soft voice, too, as she said: "Oh, that! She did act tough, didn't she? She can be, too, when she likes, but she is really a dear." The laughter left the grey eyes and they turned worried. "I'm sorry about the way I acted this morning. There was nothing else you could do but take my brother back to the cell."

That worried expression in those grey eyes disturbed Thad and he came to a swift decision. Glancing about the room at the other diners, he took the badge of the rangers from his pocket. Placing his arm on the top of the table, palm toward him, he drawled. "There's a wet spot here that you've missed, mam."

Judy threw him a surprised glance and bent forward to pass a cloth over the spot indicated by the ranger's finger. For a few moments her left ear was close to his mouth and he whispered, "Don't act surprised, ma'am," and opened his palm, being careful to keep it in line with his body.

For just a moment, as Judy recognised the badge of the rangers, the cloth in her hand became still, but it was only for that brief moment. Calmly, she finished wiping down the table and then straightened and her voice held no hint of her surprise.

"You're not eating out here, stranger. Come with me. After the way you saved my brother this morning, you're due for a special treat. Besides, I haven't thanked you yet."

"Plumb thoughtful of you, ma'am," Thad drawled, and followed her from the room.

Judy halted in the kitchen where Ma Keller was bending over a table. "Look after the boys for a while, Ma," she said softly.

Ma Keller glanced from Judy to Norse, and a broad smile left a gap in her face. "Sure, Judy, you go ahead. If the boys can't wait until I get around to serving them, then I'll silence them with a rolling pin. He's a handsome hombre, Judy."

A blush stole over Judy's face and it was still there when she faced the ranger in another room and sank into a chair after offering him one.

Thad grinned. "Ma and I are going to be firm friends. We agree on the important things."

The blush deepened and Judy said quickly. "Thank goodness that we're going to have some law and order in Goldbar at last."

The ranger's face grew serious. "What's wrong with your Sheriff?"

"Sheriff Mclone is most likely doing his best, but he's old and he's not smart. While he and the posse are out searching in one direction, the outlaws are at work in another. Anyway; every move the Sheriff makes is always known to the gang. That's why Cal asked for a ranger."

Thad glanced swiftly at Judy. "Your brother is sure keen on having law and order come to this town."

JUDY'S FACE hardened, and her voice was bitter. "I had a young brother; he was one of the Sheriff's deputies. Three months ago, Roy was shot in the back while following the trail of the Spade and his gang."

Thad shifted uneasily. "I'm sorry, mam."

"I'm not going to cry, Thad; and call me Judy."

The ranger made a cigarette and blew out a cloud of smoke. "Why is your brother in jail?"

"Cal works as a teller in the bank here. A couple of nights ago three masked men forced him at gunpoint to open the doors of the bank. But they had just robbed the bank when they were discovered by four miners. One of the outlaws was killed, but the other two got away. Cal snatched his own gun from the dead man's belt and followed the other two. He took the dead man's mount. He lost the outlaws in the hills west of the town. He was just about ready to return home when he rode up on one of the men who was bending over something on the ground." As Judy spoke, she moved about the room setting the table. Applying a flame to the kerosene light, she turned back to Norse.

"Cal and the outlaw went for their guns. Cal was in the shadow of a boulder and the outlaw was in the bright moonlight. Cal's bullet knocked the other man to his knees, but at the same time his own mount reared and threw him. By the time he was on his feet again, the outlaw was in his own saddle and racing away, but just before he disappeared between the rocks, the outlaw fired again. It was a hasty shot, but it struck the side of Cal's temple and knocked him out. When he come to he was sprawled across the bank money and Sheriff Mclone and four of the posse were bending over him. They wouldn't believe his story. They claimed he was one of the gang."

"You mentioned the Spade and his gang," the ranger said as he attacked the food which Judy placed before him. "And of course no one knows who the Spade really is?"

"He's cunning and ruthless," she replied, her eyes flashing. "He could be anyone here in town. He's the brains behind the gang. And as a rule, he doesn't ride with them when they go out on a raid."

Norse was quick with his question. "How do you know that, Judy?"

"Because when the Spade does a job himself, he always leaves an ace of spades behind. So far, after each big robbery, the posse has found a card to suit almost every spade in the pack of playing cards, but never the Ace or the King of Spades. The only time the ace of spades had been left

was when a raid or killing had been done by one person."

"Those must have been jobs which the Spade trusted to no one but himself," Thad said softly. "Well, Judy, I'll see you later. And remember, don't tell anyone that I'm a Ranger."

From the Miners' Haven, Thad wandered into four hotels. He lingered long at the bar of the Red Steer to listen to the dance-hall girl sing the same number he had heard earlier in the same evening. "She sure has a liking for that song," he thought as he went to his room.

He was sitting on the edge of the bed, pulling off his boots when he saw the playing card on the floor just a few inches from the bottom of the door. Moving forward he picked the card up and glanced at it. The back of the card was similiar in appearance to many of the cards he had seen that same night in bar rooms of Goldbar, but as he turned it face up, he suddenly stiffened.

It was the ace of spades. Across it words had been scrawled in a hurried but firm hand. *"Move on, stranger. Duke was one of my men."*

"The Spade," the ranger muttered, tossing the card on to the chair at the side of the bed. "Now, I wonder..."

As though trying to dodge searching lead, the Ranger moved swiftly to the side of the door and drew his .45's from their holsters. Without a sound, he stood there watching the man who stepped backward into the room, looking back into the hall as he closed the door.

"Howdy, Mike," Thad Norse drawled, dropping his weapons back into their leather. "I was wondering just when you would be along. Have a chair."

THE TALL, hard-faced deputy hooked the chair to him with the toe of his boot. He was about to sit down when he stiffened and snatched up the card which Thad had carelessly dropped there, face up.

"The Spade," Mike said softly. "This is bad, Thad. What are you going to do?"

"Do?" Thad reached for his tobacco. "You mean, am I going to leave town? What do you think?"

"The Spade is tough, Thad, but you won't take that warning." The deputy's face grew surly. "What's the idea, Thad? Doesn't the Cap. think I can handle this job? Hell, the Spade is a smart critter. It'll take time."

Thad grinned. "So that's what's bothering you Gray. Waal, you're wrong. The Cap. didn't send me here. I followed two killers to Westward, ten miles south of here. One of them got away and I figgered that he headed for Goldbar, so I came along, too."

"And the other killer tried to match draws with you?" It was really a statement.

"Yep, but he was a mite slow." Thad settled himself on the bed. "I'm sure that Hoopiron Kling is in Goldbar, so while I'm looking for him. I'll give you a hand to clean up your job and we can ride back to headquarters together."

"You're due for one hell of a wait," Mike growled. "I'm no closer to finding out who the Spade is than I was four months ago. All I know is what every other hombre knows.

"Why the deputy's badge, Mike?"

Mike Gray shifted the weight of the .45's on his hips. "I was wondering when you would get around to asking that question. Waal, that's easy to answer. For a while I thought that the Sheriff was the Spade. I saw my chance to find out when one of the deputies was drilled in the back. I took over his job. But my hunch was wrong. Sheriff Mclone is none too smart, but he's a square-shooter."

"And does the Sheriff know that you're a ranger?"

"Nope, I haven't seen fit to tell him. I don't think..."

Both men heard the sound of those two shots. Loud and clear, the angry snarl of lead crashed out on the night air.

"The jail," Norse snapped, pulling on his boots. He was a step behind Gray as they both raced for the door.

As they drew near the jail, the sound of running footsteps rose above their own, and Sheriff Mclone, his six-shooter in his hand, raced toward them from the direction of the hotel just down the street.

"Come on," he yelled. "Those shots came from the jail."

Gray fell into step beside him, but Thad turned in the direction of the river at the back of the jail. That moving, darting figure which had melted into the shadows of the building had escaped the Sheriff and his deputy, but Norse's range-trained eyes had been upon the alert and had seen that moving figure.

The jail itself stood back about a hundred yards from the river which flowed swiftly between steep banks of clay and rock. There was no other building between the jail and the river, but there was ample cover for a lurking figure in the thick undergrowth and trees which grew almost up to the back of the jail. Even in the daylight, a man could hide for several hours and, if he wanted to, ambush his searcher without any fear of being caught unawares.

Thad knew that. He had taken a walk about the town and its outskirts before he dropped into the Miners' Haven that same afternoon. He used caution now as he moved slowly forward, carefully avoiding the bright spots where the moonlight escaped through the trees.

Without any trouble, he went straight to the path which led through the undergrowth. Bending down, he was about to place his ear to the ground when the sound of running footsteps reached him. He raced in the direction of the sound, lifting his .45's from their holsters as he ran to give him freer leg movement.

And then, fifty yards ahead, he saw his man. Bending low, the moonlight bright on his figure, the man raced along the path towards the river.

The ranger forced more speed from his long legs and felt a warm glow of satisfaction as the gap between him and his quarry narrowed. Snapping up his right weapon, he yelled: "Hold it, hombre!"

The running figure didn't obey that command. Not directly. But he did pause. He halted long enough to whirl and to squeeze the trigger of his six-shooter. It was a hurried, desperate shot, but that hot slug which tore through the slack of Norse's right sleeve told of the man's skill in the use of the weapon.

And then the ranger's .45 barked. His shot was hurried, too, but it was accurate. The hombre in the patch of moonlight gave a yell of pain, but he didn't lose his balance. Dropping his weapon, he caught his right arm above the elbow with his left hand. And then he turned. Bending low, he ran to the bank of the river a few yards distant. Without any hesitation, he jumped.

Thad ran to the bank of the river and looked down at the water ten feet below. The bank was steep and smooth right to the edge of the water and the ranger had a clear view of its surface. He didn't hesitate when he saw his man again. Unbuckling his gunbelt, he dropped it to the ground and then he dived.

When Thad surfaced, he was closer to his quarry than he had really expected to be. He had just taken in a lungful of fresh air and was clearing the water from his vision when a pair of strong hands closed about his neck and pushed him under again. Even as he went under, the thought flashed through the ranger's mind that his at-

tacker's wound was a very slight one.

Under water, his lungs almost bursting for the want of precious air, Norse fought back, desperately against the steely strength of those merciless fingers which were strangling him even as they held him under. Never in his years of rangering had Thad kicked his feet so violently in an endeavor to tread water. Trick after trick he used as he tried to break the strangle hold, but for every trick he tried, the outlaw had one to counteract it. He, too, was an adept water-fighter.

THE STRUGGLE in the water hadn't lasted more than a few minutes, but those few minutes had been swift and furious, taking the strength of the two men who were also fighting for air. Thad, floating now on his back, took that air into his lungs in long gasps as the river carried him down stream.

That relaxation, as slight as it was, was something which the ranger longed to continue, but he forced the thought from him. Somewhere close by there was an outlaw; there was work to be done. He turned over, and treading water, looked about in the moonlight for his man.

He was there, no more than three yards away. The bright moonlight shone on his greasy face and revealed his murderous expression as he moved slowly forward, a short length of driftwood in his hand.

But he stopped advancing suddenly when he discovered that the ranger was watching him. He took one look at Norse's grim expression then he dropped his weapon and swum madly downstream.

The ranger's glance swept ahead of the retreating outlaw. About fifty yards downstream the river widened and the left bank was less steep. A desperate man, with fear driving him on, could manage to climb that bank and to escape into the thick undergrowth at the top.

The ranger proved the stronger swimmer of the two men. He cut down the distance between himself and the outlaw with long, studied strokes. The retreating man had scrambled up the bank and was just straightening for his dash into the undergrowth when Thad threw himself forward in a flying tackle. And he didn't miss. His arms closed about the outlaw's legs and he crashed full length to the ground, a foul curse escaping his lips.

The ranger rose to his feet, stepped backward a pace. "Get up!" His words were short and sharp.

The outlaw threw a sly glance toward the undergrowth a few yards away, then he looked at the ranger and a slow, cruel grin curled the corners of his mouth downwards. Slowly, he rose to his feet.

A grin touched the ranger's lips, too, but it was a mirthless tightening of the lips. He knew what was in the mind of the man facing him. Twenty pounds was a lot of weight to give away in a fist fight. The outlaw had that advantage.

The outlaw was expecting an easy victory. Killer. That's what those eyes said as they looked into Norse's.

But the ranger had seen that same expression in the eyes of other men.

"They don't call me Rockfist fer nuthing," the outlaw sneered. "Stranger, this is going ter be fun."

Thad didn't reply; he just stood there watching, waiting.

ROCKFIST made the first move. He took a slow, cautious step forward, his huge fists close together almost on a level with his chin. But his straight forward movement was only a blind. He stepped suddenly to one side and put the full force of his body behind the smashing right which he drove at Thad's face.

Rockfist went backward almost as fast as he had stepped forward. He didn't go back on his own accord; there had been some force behind that

left which the ranger had smashed to Rockfist's chin.

Thad Norse had used that same punch many times before. It usually meant the end of the fight because he knew just where and when to place it. But it wasn't the end of the fight in this case. That punch smashed Rockfist to the ground, but he wasn't out. With a dazed expression on his face, he looked up at the ranger, then, shaking his head as though to clear it, he rose slowly.

A sound like the bellow of a loco bull was on his lips as he moved forward, his huge fists swinging wildly.

Those punches were wild and without aim, but their speed and number counteracted that fault. It was impossible for all of them to miss their mark. One of them didn't miss. It caught the ranger on the side of the head and sent him staggering sidewards. Slightly dazed, he went to the ground which in turn seemed to be in one hell of a hurry to rush up and to greet him.

Rockfist grinned when the ranger went down, and he didn't wait for him to rise. He rushed forward and jumped high into the air and those heavy, water-soaked boots were directly above Thad's face.

They didn't make contact with flesh and bone. Desperately, Norse rolled to one side. There wasn't much space between those boots and his face. He sensed rather than felt their presence as they grazed his right jaw bone. Just to be on the safe side, he continued his roll until he was a couple of yards away. Then he rose to his feet.

"Get up." Those were the only words he spoke as he looked down at Rockfist. He didn't have to say any more. The moonlight was full on his face. The outlaw didn't have to have very keen eye-sight to see the anger which was now blazing in those cold eyes.

Rockfist took heed of that warning. For a few moments he glared up at the ranger, then with a foul curse he rose and stood swaying slowly backward and forward. "What the hell are we fighting over, stranger?" His voice was almost a croak. "What the hell do yer want?"

Thad couldn't still the amused smile which turned the corners of his mouth as the outlaw spoke, but that smile didn't last long. "I want you, Rockfist. You're coming along with me."

"With yer? What the hell are yer talking about, hombre? Who the devil are yer?"

"Thad Norse. Texas Ranger. I don't know whether or not that slug you fired back at the jail did any damage, but I'm arresting you on suspicion until I'm sure." Thad took a step forward. "Just whom were you shooting at, Rockfist. At Cal Hester?"

"Texas Ranger! Hell, ranger, yer're trying ter hogtie the wrong steer. I was only carrying out the duties of an honest citizen when yer jumped me. I heard that shot, too. I was going ter investigate it when I saw yer. I thought that yer were the skunk who fired that slug. I thought yer was after me, too, so I made a break fer it. I wasn't keen on poking my nose in the way of a slug. I wan't looking fer trouble, but when yer dived in after me, I had ter fight back. Honest, ranger, that's the truth."

"Liar!" The ranger spoke that word softly, but that soft sound was just as deadly as a shouted threat. "You're one of the Spade's gang, Rockfist, and I'm going to make you talk even if I have to gunwhip you."

"Yer bluffing, ranger." A cunning grin was plain on the outlaw's face. "Yer've gotta *prove* that I'm telling a lie. I know the code of the rangers. A man is innocent until he is proved guilty, a ranger never manhandles a prisoner."

Norse forced his lips to twist into a cruel smile. "You're wrong this time, Rockfist, I don't have any code. If

you get battered about a lot, it won't matter. No one will know that I broke a code of the rangers. I had to knock you about a little to capture you." His grin widened. "Rockfist, I'm going to enjoy taking you apart. I think you'll talk before I'm through with you." Hoping that the outlaw wouldn't call the bluff, Thad waited. Then he snapped. "All right, hombre, who's the Spade?"

"I don't know what yer're talking about, ranger. I'm telling the truth. Hell, can't yer tell when a man's speaking the truth?"

"Just too bad—for you," Norse drawled. He shook his head and looked at the outlaw in the moonlight. "It's a shame that you're so useless with your fists. This is going to be so easy that I'm not going to enjoy it, not really."

The outlaw looked about like a cornered coyote, then he turned his eyes back to the ranger. "You won't get away with it, ranger. I'll tell everyone that you..." Rockfist threw himself forward head first, straight at Thad's stomach.

Thad sidestepped quickly, but he wasn't fast enough. The outlaw's left shoulder struck the ranger on the thigh, sending him prawling. Once again Thad felt those steely fingers about his neck.

Again the outlaw had the advantage. He was fighting to kill; Thad was fighting only to capture his man. That made a difference. Slowly, but surely, the ranger felt his strength weakening as his lungs burnt through the lack of sufficient air.

Norse drew back his right arm, he drove his fist into the outlaw's stomach, a little below the belt buckle. That punch did not travel more than six inches, but that distance was enough. Rockfist gasped and relaxed his grip as he rolled sideward.

But Rockfist was tough. That punch knocked the wind out of him, but he wasn't out of the fight. Before the ranger could scramble to his feet, Rockfist lifted his right arm and threw a handful of dirt into Thad's eyes. The ranger was still wiping his eyes when a hard driven fist smashed to his chin, driving him backward.

THE OUTLAW could have killed his man then if he had followed up that punch with another. But he didn't wait. Turning, he ran back along the river bank, upstream. And he was over twenty yards away before Norse recovered sufficiently to give chase.

Thad heard the splash as the outlaw dived into the river from the same place from which he had dived just before the fight. With a puzzled frown on his forehead, the ranger searched the surface of the water both up and down stream, but without success: Finally, with that frown still on his forehead, he picked up his gunbelt and turned back toward the town with the intention of changing into dry clothes before returning to the jail.

When he entered the jail ten minutes later, one of three men straightened from a figure on the floor of the cell. "Some skunk drilled Cal." Mike Gray said. "I heard shooting. Did you get the coyote, Thad?"

"Met him Thad replied briefly ."But he jumped into the river. Can't understand it. Couldn't find a trace of him."

"Most likely made his getaway in the rough country over the river," Gray suggested, throwing Thad a sharp glance.

"Maybe. How's Hester?"

"Purty shot up, so the sawbones says. Pity you didn't catch the hombre. We might have been able to make him talk. He's one of the Spade's gang. He left a calling card—the seven of spades."

Sheriff Mclone, on his heels beside the figure on the floor looked up and growled. "The hombres who built this jail didn't have the brains of a coy-

ote. Every damn cell has a window which is accessible from the outside. It was easy for the skunk to shove his sixshooter through the bars of the window." He turned back to the man beside him. "Wal, Doc?"

The short, fat man bending over Cal turned a round face. "It'll be touch and go even with the best of care and attention," he said, shaking his head. "But he won't stand a chance if he stays here."

"But what else can I do?" the Sheriff snapped. "Hell, he's my prisoner."

"But right now he's under my care," the Doctor replied firmly. "Sorry, Sheriff, but he's going where he can get better attention. And the best place that I know of its at his house where his sister can look after him. Hold that damn light steady, will you."

Sheriff Mclone steadied the kerosene light which he held. "All right, Doc, the prisoner is in your hands. But, if he escapes, I'll have your hide nailed to my door. Remember that."

"Oh, for heaven's sake...! Give me a hand, you three fellows.

JUDY DIDN'T waste time asking questions when her brother's limp figure was carried through the back of the house into the bedroom. She gave a startled gasp of horror, but she rushed away to carry out the doctor's orders. She stepped away from the bed then to make room for him and she turned her questioning eyes to Thad, catching her full, bottom lip between her teeth as the ranger explained what had happened.

Finally, the doctor straightened. "All we can do now is wait." Turning to Judy he gave her some hurried instructions concerning her brother, then he quickly picked up his bag.

Judy stepped forward and placed a hand on his arm. "Doctor Long, please stay sober in case I need you. "

"Him stay sober," Ma Keller said, coming into the room. "It's a waste of time telling him that when he has other ideas."

Doctor Long gave the two women a bleak stare. "If I feel like taking a drop of whisky, that's my business, young lady," he snapped. "That'll be two dollars, Miss Hester."

Thad moved forward and dropped the money in to the smooth, white hand. "The little lady asked you to stay sober, Doc. I'd take that as good advice, if I were you. I'd hate to have to dip you into the horse trough if we need your services again." There was a grin on the ranger's lips, but it didn't reach his eyes.

Doctor Long returned the cold stare, but his gaze shifted first, it flickered up to Norse's dark hair as though finding something of interest there. Suddenly, he turned and walked out the door.

But the ranger had seen that unreasonable hate in those pale, blue eyes.

"I hope that I'll never have to get the Doc to dig a slug out of me," he drawled.

Mike stepped away from the bed where he had been standing with the Sheriff. "As a rule, the Doc is cautious with his whisky, but when he does go off the water waggon, he's a terror." He turned to the Sheriff. "Coming, Sheriff?"

Sheriff Mclone turned to Judy. "Your brother is still my prisoner, Miss Judy. Mike and I will be dropping in here every now and again."

Judy looked at the Sheriff with surprise. "But Sheriff. One of the Spade's men shot Cal. Isn't that proof enough that he's not one of the gang?"

"It proves exactly nothing, Miss Judy. As far as the law of Goldbar is concerned, your brother may have fallen out with the gang. He said, himself, that he had a fight with one of the gang. Wal, this ties in with his words. He was trying to get away with the money so the Spade had him shot

out of revenge tonight, and also to keep him from talking."

The Sheriff and his deputy were almost at the door when the figure on the bed muttered and moved restlessly. All four people in the room turned quickly back to the bed, but there was no need for them to bend to hear the muttered words which came from the white lips.

"That song...again tonight. The Spade...Rides when that song—"

The rest of the sentence ended in a mutter which was too low for the listeners' ears. Finally, with Judy's cool hand on his forehead, Hester's restless tossing ceased.

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THE SHERIFF and his deputy glanced at each other and straightened from the bed. "What's he talking?" Sheriff Mclone muttered. "Can't puzzle it out."

"The Spade is going to ride again," Thad Norse said softly. "But when and where? That's something we've got to figger out."

"You don't have to be a lawman to figger that out," Ma said. "The stage is due to leave here day after tomorrow." She stepped forward and moved the kerosene light into the centre of the table. "And I'll bet my Besty against your sixshooter, Sheriff, that the bank will be shipping out some gold on it. We all know that the gold must be shipped out of Goldbar someday."

"Ter hell with the gold," Sheriff Mclone growled. "I'm sick of Mckay and his damn lack of confidence in the law. I took a posse of eight men with me to guard that gold what was supposed ter be on that stage the day it was held up. Four of those men, and the driver and shotgun guard were shot dead by the Spade and his gang, and Mike and I were damn lucky to escape, too. And when we returned with the stage to Goldbar, the damn banker informed us that the strongbox which the Spade managed ter get away with contained nothing but rocks and straw."

"It would have been just the same if there had been gold on that stage," Thad drawled.

"Ter hell with the gold, and yer, too. Norse," Sheriff Mclone strode angrily out of the back door.

"You touched on a sore spot there," Mike Gray said. "The Spade and his gang have been a mighty sharp thorn in the Sheriff's side for some time." He grinned. "Sheriff's Mclone is getting that way that he turns purple every time he sees an ace of spades. See you later."

"If you don't mind, Judy, I'll bed down here for tonight—just in case the Spade decides to pay your brother another visit. But first I'll amble downtown for a while. Ma can stand guard while I'm away." He grinned. "The Spade may be a tough hombre, but I figger that he'll have more sense than to tangle with Ma and her Besty. I'm sure...!"

Judy's soft lips stopped the rest of the words. Judy had acted impulsively and her kiss was really meant as one of gratitude, but as she started to draw away, Thad's long arms closed about her in a hungry embrace. She didn't fight against him. Indeed, she lingered a few moments in his arms, her clinging lips full of sweetness. Then, her eyes wide and with one hand pressed against her mouth, she moved gently out of his arms and into the next room.

Judy's sweet surrender confused the ranger and almost cost him his life. The clinging touch of those soft lips was still on his when he opened the door and stepped out into the moon-

light. Just in time, the flash of moonlight on steel warned him. He threw himself sidewards, but just the same, the skin of his neck felt the burning slug as it snarled on its way and buried itself in the door.

THE RANGER'S dive carried him to the right of the door. Even as he hit the hard ground, he rolled and flattened his body, stomach down, his .45's spitting searching lead in the direction he had seen the flash of flame. A cool grin came to his lips as a cry of pain rang out in the night. But then he had to silence a curse as two shots crashed out, one a couple of seconds behind the other and a slug kicked the dirt into his face. Twisting about, he drove a bullet a little to the right of him—but without results. "Two of the skunks," he muttered as he inched slowly forward, his keen ears listening for the faintest sound.

"Thad!" Judy's anxious voice yelled. "Thad, are you hurt?"

"No;" he yelled. "Stay where you are." As he spoke the last word, he shifted position quickly and again moved slowly forward.

He had moved no more than four yards when the sound of painful groans reached him. Fearing a trap, he changed position again and stretched himself flat along the ground. But then, as running footsounds reached him, he jumped to his feet and moved in pursuit.

Norse didn't waste time trying to find the path which the ambusher had taken through the undergrowth. Instead, he played a hunch and raced along the cleared space at the back of the buildings. Without pausing, he swung to the right at the back of the jail and found the narrow path which he had followed not long before.

And, as before, he was without success. For a couple of seconds he saw his quarry, but he didn't have time to raise his .45's. The hombre there in the patch of moonlight twenty yards ahead didn't even throw a backward glance. With one elbow jutting out from his side as though he was holding his nostrils with his fingers, he jumped outward and disappeared below the edge of the river bank.

The ranger wasn't long in reaching the edge of the bank, but he saw only the smooth surface of the water in the moonlight; there wasn't even a ringlet to reveal that a figure had broke the surface. For a few moments, he toyed with the idea of diving in and searching the overhanging rocks further downstream. Deciding against it at last, he lifted his shoulders in a shrug and hurried back along the track.

Lights were moving about at the back of the Miners' Haven when Thad returned. He didn't reveal his presence to the men who were searching and talking loudly. Instead, he made his way through the undergrowth until his boot touched something soft and a low groan came to his ears. Dropping to his knees, he touched a blood-soaked and limp figure and turned it gently until a patch of moonlight played on a pain filled mask which was a man's face.

"Hoopiron Kling," the ranger said softly. "Looks as though the job I came here to do is finished. It's been a long..."

The figure under his hand moved ever so slightly and the words, though blood-choked, were easily understood.

"Played me luck too far. Should... should have kep...kept going. Had you outsmarted, West. But they paid me...me to get you... Double-crossed me when...I failed. Shot me in the...the back. Get the sawbones, ranger, and I... I'll tell you who pa..." The figure of Hoopiron Kling stiffened and the went limp.

Hoopiron wasn't dead. Thad reached out and felt life beating weakly in the wrist of the limp hand. Lifting his

head, he gazed in the direction he had last seen the searchers, but they had either given up the search or moved further down the rows of buildings. With a muttered curse, he picked up the still figure and, carrying it over to the Miners' Haven, kicked the closed door with the tow of his boot.

"Oh, Thad, I thought..." Judy's smile of relief froze as she saw the figure in the ranger's arms. Throwing aside the door, she stepped backward. "Thad, is he...?"

"No, not yet." Norse's words were short and terse as he lowered Hoopiron to the floor so that the light from the kerosene lamp fell on the wounded man's features. He straightened. "I'll have to pull the Doc out of bed. Where does he live?"

Judy gave the directions in quick, clear words. "Fifth house down the street. On the opposite side. Go out the front door."

THAD DIDN'T wait to hear that last sentence. His long legs carried him at rushing speed out into the street. He was crossing a dark narrow alley when he crashed into someone coming out of the alleyway. The man ultered a gasp of surprise and caught the ranger in a strong grip.

"Hold on thar a moment, feller. Where the hell are yer going in such a hurry?"

"Sheriff, I'm after the Doc. I haven't time to explain."

"Yer'll be wasting yer time by going to his house, Norse. I tossed the sawbones into the cell to sober him up."

"Good, Sheriff. I'll go back and see what I can do while you're getting the Doc. I'll be at the Miners' Haven. Don't waste time." Thad turned about, but the Sheriff's following words halted him.

"The Doc stays where he is, Norse. It'd only be a waste of time trying to sober him up."

Thad grinned. "You go get him, Sheriff. I'll sober him up."

"Yer heard me the first time, West. I said that the Doc stays where he is."

Thad's eyes narrowed as a frown touched his forehead. "Sorry, Sheriff, but I want the Doc, and I'll get him, even if I have to get in bad with the law of Goldbar."

Sheriff Mclone bent slightly at the wait and his hands hovered over the butts of his weapons. He spat into the dust of the street and his eyes closed to narrow slits. "Meaning just what? Yer don't scare me, Norse."

The ranger didn't reply, but the taut lines which appeared at the corners of his mouth, told of his anger. He relaxed slightly and set himself for that flashing draw. "Sorry Sheriff, but..."

Two shots, crashing out almost as one, spun Thad about. Forgetting the angry lawman, the ranger broke into a desperate run back toward the Miners' Haven. He was within twenty yards of the eating house when another shot disturbed the night. The ranger recognised that sound and a grin relaxed the tautness of his mouth.

"Good old Ma," he muttered. "I hope you got the skunk." Without a pause, he hurled himself through the building into the room where he had left Hoopiron Kling.

Ma Keller swung away from the window as the ranger entered the room. "Missed the skunk," she said angrily, placing the shotgun against the wall. "Never even plucked a whisker. Damn Besty, she must really be getting rusty. No use in wasting time by going after the skunk, Norse. He's clear by now." She moved over and placed her arm about Judy who had just entered the room. "Afraid you won't need the Doc now, Thad. Your friend here collected both those slugs."

Thad didn't move over to look at the body. From where he stood, he could see that hole in the side of the

head and the dark patch on the left shoulder. "Looks as though we've missed out again," he said grimly.

Sheriff Mclone hadn't been far behind when the ranger tore into the room. He stepped forward now. "All right, Ma what happened?" He threw Thad a swift glance.

"You've got eyes, Sheriff. Can't you use them?" Ma Keller snapped.

"Don't get funny, Ma, or I'll toss yer in with the Doc," the Sheriff growled.

Ma Keller sighed and sank into a chair beside the window. "All right, Sheriff. I was sitting right here beside this open window when it happened. Judy was in the kitchen heating some water. All of a sudden two shots crashed out in my ears, damn near stampeded the life out of me. Took me a few moments to get over the scare, but when I did, I snatched up old Besty who was standing right where she is now. I looked out the window and couldn't see anyone, but I fired just the same in the direction of the running footsteps. I missed, damn it. I'm not the shot I used to be. That's all, Mclone. No. Not exactly. I found this on the floor just under the window."

"The ace of spades!" the Sheriff growled, eyeing the card which Ma Keller held forward. "Isn't that enough. And seems to me that a damn sight more has been going on, too. Who's the dead hombre, and what the hell has been going on here?"

THAD EXPLAINED about the ambush, but he still didn't reveal to the Sheriff that he was a ranger and that he had chased Hoopiron Fordsome over half of Texas. "They paid this hombre to drill me," he finished. "And when he failed, they drilled him in the back.

"One of the skunks must have been following him."

"And the hombre who drilled him the first time must have come back to finish the job." The Sheriff threw Thad a swift glance. "Sorry about our little argument, Norse. But you got my back up when yer refused to explain why yer wanted the Doc."

"Forget it, Sheriff," the ranger said softly. "But you're wrong about one thing. The hombre who drilled Hoopiron the first time wasn't the skunk who finished the job." Thad was bending out the window striking matches as he spoke. "The hombre I chased dived into the river. He wouldn't have had time to change his clothes and return here. And if he returned in his wet duds, he would have left a wet trail behind him." Thad left the window and bent over the dead man.

He straightened suddenly, his face thoughtful. "Sheriff, who packs a .38 smokepole about Goldbar?"

Sheriff Melone scratched his head. "Chips Allen and about six other gamblers here in Goldbar, but they mostly use their sleeve-guns. Why?"

"The two slugs that killed Hoopiron were fired from a .38," the ranger said as though talking to himself. "But if there are so many .38's. . ."

"If you pair of yapping coyotes don't get this body shifted to Boothill, I'll empty Besty's other barrel into the seats of your jeans. It's damn near daylight and we haven't closed our eyes yet."

"All right, Ma. All right. I'll get a couple of men to tote the body down ter the jail. If I can find anyone ter do it. Even the coyotes are asleep at this hour. Then I'll come back and stay with Cal, just in case there happens ter be some more shooting."

"Get some sleep, Sheriff," Thad drawled. "I'll stay here tonight. You make sure that the Doc is sober enough in the morning to have another look at Cal."

"Sure, Norse, sure." There was relief in the Sheriff's voice as he turned and walked out the door.

"Hummmmphs," Ma Keller said as she stared after the lawman. "Hummmphs, honest, but dumb. How did he ever become Sheriff, beats me."

Thad grinned and went into the room where Judy was sitting wearily in a chair, staring, white-faced, at her brother in the bed. "Go to bed, Judy," Thad said softly. "I'll take over now."

"He's still the same, Thad. I couldn't sleep, really." She got up and bent over the still figure.

The ranger moved over and turned her gently and, as she pressed against him as though it was the natural thing to do, he folded his arms about her. "You may as well get some sleep, Judy. There's nothing even the doctor can do at the present. If there was I would have him here, even if I had to pull the jail apart. I'll wake you if there's any change."

She raised her face and looked searchingly into his eyes and what she saw there seemed to calm her. She lifted her lips for his kiss, then, swiftly, she moved out of his arms and left the room.

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THAD NORSE may as well have given in to the sleep which he fought against. Although he kept alert, nothing further happened while he was sitting beside the wounded man's bed. The dawn was just a faint suggestion when he moved softly out of the house and through the silent street to the Red Steer where he went to the door of his room.

He placed his hand on the knob of the door, but he didn't open it. Instead, he played one of the hunches which are common to a range-bred gunslinger. Stepping to one side of the door, he drew his right .45 and threw the door wide.

Barrrrrng. Only one weapon could make such a sound, even in the close confinement of the room. The very sound was enough to cause alarm, not to mention the messages of laden death which shattered the woodwork of the door and left it a battered useless thing on its hinges.

But the ranger had been expecting an ambush even if he had expected a lighter weapon to snarl at him. He acted swiftly. His .45 was snarling out its answer a split second after the roar of the shotgun. He triggered his weapon until the hammer clicked on an empty chamber, then drawing his other .45, he moved slowly into the room, a cool grin on his lips, his walk almost careless.

Still walking as though he was in a friendly room instead of one which had snarled death at him, he crossed the room and raised the blind. Turning, he looked toward the bed.

And then he uttered a curse of surprise. There was no still, bloody figure on the bed, nor was there a body anywhere in the room. The shotgun was there, but it was tied to the foot of the iron bed and there was a length of cord running from it to the door knob.

He moved closer to the bed and studied the crude, man-made death trap more closely. It was a simple arrangement. The cord had been tied to the trigger of the weapon and then taken along the wall of the room on to the knob of the door in such a fashion that the slightest movement of the door pulled the trigger of the shotgun, releasing its deadly charge.

Simple! Yes, but just as deadly as if there had been a finger on the trigger of that weapon.

Thad bent to remove the cord and in that moment he uttered his second curse within the time of five minutes.

He bent lower and his eyes narrowed as they filled with a swift savage anger.

On the bed, face up, was the king of spades.

"A little too damn sure of yourself," the ranger's voice was a whisper. "Wal, hombre, you've missed out again. I'll..."

Footsteps running toward the room, cut the ranger's words short. He turned as Chips Allen came forward, buttoning up his trousers as he halted just inside the door. "What the hell was all the shooting about, Norse?" Allen moved forward, his open mouth expressing his surprise as his eyes fell on the shotgun and the cord.

"Mighty neat," he said as he seated himself on the bed. "How come it missed you?" He glanced sharply at the ranger. "And now you're going to ask me who was in your room while you were out." He grinned widely. "And I'm going to reply that I don't know because dozens of hombres pass through the place at all hours of the night and I don't ask questions?"

"Nope, you're wrong, Allen," Thad drawled. "The hombre who set the shotgun came into the room the same way he went out—through the forced window." He didn't look at Allen, but he was watching him in the cracked mirror near the bed. "That's twice one of the Spade's gang has been in my room."

CHIPS ALLEN moved slightly on the bed, the movement was casual enough, but it was for a purpose; it brought his hand closer to the .38 on his left hip. He didn't raise his voice, but his words were plain.

"Ever since you and your ranger pals cleaned up Rhy City and you blew away my gun-hand, I've hated you Norse; you know that. And the feeling is still the same. Some of these days that hatred is going to get the better of me and I'm going to try and beat that draw of yours. But that time's not yet. And you're well off the trail, ranger. I'm not the Spade, and what's more, I don't know who the skunk is. If I did, I'd tell you. I've no love for the skunk. Some of his damn gang robbed my saloon a while back. So until you've corralled the skunk, we'll let our personal feelings ride for a spell, eh?"

"Sure. But you didn't do so bad that night, Allen. The rest of your gang died that night. It would have been as easy for me to have drilled you through the head as through the hand."

"So what? I don't owe you my life, Norse. You didn't have enough on me, otherwise you'd have thrown me in the clink. And you've got nothing on me now, remember that, ranger."

"Sure," Thad said softly, but the tone of his voice revealed that his mind wasn't on the conversation. "Sure."

Chips Allen moved over to the door. He turned and smiled mockingly. "Somehow, ranger, I think that the Spade is one hombre who is a little too smart for even you. And don't worry, West, I'll not tell anyone that you're a ranger." Still smiling, he disappeared down the hall.

Thad didn't bother to reply. Removing the shotgun, he threw himself down on the bed and relaxed.

It was three hours later when he left the room and went to the Miners' Haven. After discovering from Judy that Hester's condition was still the same, he returned to the saloon of the Red Steer.

"Betty Page?" the surly bartender said as he passed a cloth over the bar. "She won't be down for a couple of hours yet, mister."

"Then I'll have to go up to her," the ranger drawled. "Which room, barkeep?"

"I ain't saying, feller, You'll have ter wait for her to come down."

Thad didn't raise his voice, but as he spoke, he looked into the bar-

tender's small eyes. "I asked which room, mister."

The bartender didn't argue further. "Upstairs," he growled. "Second room on the right of the hall."

"Thanks," the ranger walked up the stairs and knocked on the second door and as a woman's voice inquired, "Who's there?" he said softly. "Thad West. Make yourself decent. I want to talk to you, mam."

"Go away, I'm busy."

"Better to open the door, mam, than to have it smashed down."

There was a brief pause then soft footsteps crossed the floor and the door was opened slightly. "What do you want? Look, Norse, I didn't really mean to see you killed yesterday. I was only earning a few dollars. Warren told me that he was going to play a joke on you. I didn't know—"

"Forget it. This is something different mam," Thad pushed the door wider and stepped into the room. Despite himself, he felt a glow of admiration for the pretty dance-hall girl before him. The thin, blue wrap which she had thrown about her revealed every feminine curve of her young, soft body.

"What do you want?" she asked, the fear in her eyes adding depth to their beauty.

"Those songs you sing," he closed the door and moved over to a chair. "The new ones, I mean. Do you make them up yourself?"

"No, they—" The red lips closed tightly and then opened again. "I don't see where it's any of your business. Now, will you get out of my room and let me have some sleep before I go back to work?"

The ranger lifted his shoulder in a shrug. "Have it your way, mam. I don't manhandle women to get information." He let his eyes rove over her figure. "But I'd sure hate to see a noose about that purty neck."

"A noose! Hi, what the heck are you talking about? I've done nothing to put me in bad with the law. There are hundreds of dames making their living the same way as I do. I'm just Betty Page, a percentage dame."

NORSE spoke slowly. "One of your songs is new. Someone who knows a little about such stuff wrote it for you, and I want to know who that hombre is. That hombre is one of the Spade's gang, or more likely, the Spade, himself." He moved over closer to the girl. "Or did you write those words to that song yourself?"

She was swift with her denial. "No," her eyes widened with fear. "If you're trying to pump me, mister, you're out of luck. I know nothing. I just sing the songs."

The ranger placed both hands on the soft shoulders. A soft note crept into his voice, just as though he were talking to a frightened child or a timid horse. "You needn't be afraid, mam. I'm not one of the Spade's gang, and I don't intend to hurt you." He placed one hand in his pocket and then extended it, palm up, towards her.

"A ranger!" Betty Page gasped. She sank on to the bed. "Honest, ranger, I can't help you. I don't know who writes my new songs. Singing is part of my job, and I mostly sing all the old numbers. But now and again someone writes a new song and shoves it under my door with a little note, threatening me that if I don't sing the song at the time stated I will never sing again. There is always twenty dollars in the note. So I do as I'm told for two reasons. Look, ranger. I don't want to get into trouble with the law, but I like to live the same as anyone else."

"Sure, mam. Have you any ideas who writes those songs? Chips Allen?"

"Honest, ranger, I don't know. He's my boss, but I don't know. All I know is that each new song is always to the tune of some old one."

Thad looked sharply at her. "Anything you haven't told me?"

She glanced fearfully at the closed door and he didn't waste time. Softly, but swiftly he crossed the room, and threw the door wide, his hand on the butt of his right .45. "We're still alone, mam."

"There is a little more, but I don't know if it's anything." She spoke almost in a whisper. "Each new song I receive always has one verse marked with an X. That means that the verse must be sung twice each time I sing the song. I must always sing the song three times, sometimes the same night, other times, over a period of three days—even a week. It may be just a coincidence, but each time a new song has been sung three times, there is always a robbery or a killing by the Spade gang."

"What about the Doc?"

Betty's forehead wrinkled. "I had the Doc picked out at first, but the Doc isn't the Spade. The Doc was in jail each time something happened, so he couldn't be mixed up with the Spade. Sorry, but that's all I know, ranger."

"What about that last note and song you received? Have you still got it?"

"No; I did what the note said. Burned the lot. I didn't want to take any risk. When I received the first note some months ago, I kept it for a few days. My room was searched a couple of nights later and the note stolen. Next day I received a threatening note from the Spade. I've followed the orders ever since. Hell, ranger, I couldn't buck the Spade and his gang. I could write down the words of the song, if that's any help." And, as Thad nodded, the girl busied herself over a sheet of paper which she tore from a pad and handed to him.

"Thanks," The ranger picked up one of the girl's shoes and passed it across to her. "Throw that at me as I leave, and cuss like hell." He grinned at her. "All right, make it sound good."

Betty didn't have to be told twice. She yelled a couple of times, loudly, then she cussed him in very unladylike terms as he walked to the door and threw it open. "Keep your damn paws to yourself," she said angrily, her voice shrill. And her aim was good. If the small shoe had been heavier, it would have dropped the ranger to his knees as it connected with the back of his neck.

"Women," Thad said loudly as he walked across the saloon to the bar. His face colored as he looked into the grinning faces. "Never could figure them." He swung on the bartender as though embarrassed. "Whisky, and pronto."

AS THAD drank his whisky, he looked about the room, a thoughtful expression in his eyes. The long saloon was unusually crowded for that time of the day. Men, mostly miners, packed the floor and more were still coming in through the swing doors.

"All these hombres," he drawled as he turned to a thick fellow at his side. "Must be something special going on. These miners wouldn't leave their claims at this hour of the day unless there was something mighty important about to break." He set his glass on the bar.

"The Sheriff sent fer us. Seems he's going after the Spade and his gang. He wants every man he can get to ride in the posse. Say, where have yer been that yer haven't heard?"

"The Spade, eh?" Norse said softly. "Then I'll tag along, too." He didn't say any more, just stood there making circles on the top of the bar with the bottom of the glass.

He was still standing at the bar when the Sheriff entered the saloon. Thad, watching the lawman in the long mirror behind the bar, saw the burly figure move slowly about the room,

stopping here and there to speak to someone. At last he glanced toward the ranger and moved over beside him.

"What's wrong, Sheriff?" A voice yelled from the crowd. "Afraid yer might lose yer job when the election comes along next week? About time you caught the Spade anyway."

Sheriff Mclone's face darkened, but he turned to Thad. "I'm forming a posse to hunt down the Spade and his gang. I'll get the skunk today if it's the last thing I ever do. Suppose yer've already heard?"

"Yep," Thad drawled. "I figger I'll ride along, too. How long before the posse leaves?"

"About then minutes," the Sheriff screwed the buckle of his gunbelt more to the centre of his stomach. "But I don't want yer to ride with it, Norse." And when Thad raised an eyebrow, the Sheriff said quickly. "Why didn't yer tell me that yer're a ranger. Gray told me this morning."

Thad shrugged. "Mike talks too much. What else did he tell you?"

"Nothing, ranger. But he sure took load off me mind when he told me who you were."

"Oh, how's that, Sheriff?"

"Thar's a stage due to leave here within a couple of hours, Norse. Thar may be gold on it and thar may not be —damn that banker—but just in case thar is, I'm sending seven men ter ride with that stage. And I want someone who can keep his head, if thar's trouble, to ride with those hombres. I think yer're that man, Norse, now that I know that yer're a ranger. Mike's leading the posse and I'm staying here with five men just in case the Spade decided ter rake the town while the posse is out searching for him. Never know what he'll do. He's a cunning skunk."

"Looks as though I'll be missing some fun," Thad said, "but if that's the way you want it...?"

"Good. The men will be waiting for you in front of the bank when the stage is due ter leave. And yer might get all the excitement yer want, Norse. The Spade might pick this as a good time ter hold up that stage. That's why I'm sending along the seven men." The Sheriff turned on his heels and disappeared into the crowd.

Thad left the bar, too. But he didn't follow the Sheriff. He went to his room and took from his pocket the piece of paper on which Betty had written the song. He didn't pay much attention to the whole song. He concentrated mainly on the verse marked with an X.

Riding the ranges, I am always alone
A nag's my companion, the range is my home.
I'm not even eating, I've no longing to
Down hearted and cussing, I'm blaming just you.
There's never a true heart, I'm starting to learn
Our love is so heartless, it makes such queer turns.
Will your world be happy when I set you free,
Not ever again love, a sweetheart for me.

The ranger was so busy trying to find a clue in the words of the song that he didn't hear Mike Gray calling the posse together or hear the thunder of hooves as the horses headed out of town. The stage was due to leave within the half hour when he finally shoved the paper angrily into his pocket and turned towards the Miner's Haven.

JUDY SMILED in pleased welcome as she opened the door in answer to Thad's knock, but her face took on a troubled expression after she greeted him. "Cal is still the same, Thad. The doctor just left. Oh, Thad, do you think that Slade will ever...?"

"Sure, he will, Judy." Thad closed

the door and took the slim figure tenderly into his arms. Acting as though the smiling Ma Keller wasn't there, he kissed the curved lips which parted invitingly. "Now, don't you worry, Judy. It'll take a while for your brother to get well. He has some nasty holes in him, but he's tough. He'll make it. Now, how about a smile before I go?" And, as she asked the obvious question, he told her where he was going.

And then, after warning her not to leave her brother alone, he turned to go.

She followed him to the door and he turned to her, his face thoughtful and grim. "Whatever you do, Judy, don't leave Cal's side while I'm away. Stay with him yourself. Understand?" Without giving her a chance to reply, he walked away.

It was twenty minutes later when the ranger rode up to the bank where the Sheriff was talking to seven men beside the stage coach. On top of the stage, the driver and the shotgun guard sat close together, talking in low tones.

"Thar yer are, Norse," the Sheriff growled. "I thought that yer had altered yer mind about riding with the stage. She's ready ter roll now." Turning to a man standing near the door of the bank, he snapped. "Anything else."

"No, Sheriff. Just that one strong box." The tall, lean hombre turned and entered the bank.

Sheriff Mclone turned back to the men who were swinging into their saddles. "All right, fellers. And remember, West is in cahrge."

"A tough looking bunch of hombres, the ranger thought as he turned the stallion after the stage.

For the first six or seven miles, Norse rode deep in thought. The country was too open for anyone to risk an ambush, and anyway, Thad figured that the stage was not yet far enough out of Goldbar for a holdup to occur.

The seven men riding with the ranger made several attempts to draw him into conversation, but Thad's only reply to each man was either a shake or a nod of the head. Most of the time he didn't hear the remarks which were addressed to him. He was still going over the words of the song which Betty Page had given to him.

A couple of hours later, the country roughed up some. The ranger, silent until now, suddenly straightened in the saddle and just managed to still the curse surprise which sprang to his lips.

"So damn simple that I missed it," he muttered. "In that case I'm about due to meet trouble any moment." Unseen by his companions, he pressed a finger firmly against the stallion's shoulder, near the mane.

The slight pressure of his finger drew the stallion out of its easy lope. Like a wild colt, it arched its back in series of quick savage bucks, then as though altering its mind, it stretched its powerful legs into breath-taking speed in the direction of the stage which had disappeared round a bend in the rocky trail.

But the stallion didn't pass the lumbering stage, as though on its own accord, the animal slowed its speed as it drew level with the driver.

"Plumb loco," Thad shouted to the grinning driver and his guard. Then his voice sank to a lower tone. "Ranger," he said briefly, raising his hand to the brim of his hat, palm toward the driver and shotgun guard so that they could see the badge in his hand. "Be ready to back my play. If my hunch is right, it'll come at the next steep climb."

Neither of the men replied, just nodded and glanced grimly back at the seven riders who were moving up on the coach.

THE RANGER'S hunch proved correct. The stage was just starting a steep climb ten minutes later when the rider on Thad's left suddenly halted his mount. But the ranger had been ready for such a move. His eyes had been on the slack in the reins near the mount's bit. The moment that slack disappeared, he acted.

And with telling results. His savage, quick back-handed blow went straight to its mark. The back of his fists caught that gun-pulling hombre square in the mouth and lifted him from the saddle.

The ranger was too busily engaged to watch the hombre hit the ground. Kicking his feet clear of the stirrups, he threw himself sideward and down. He landed squarely on his feet and as he turned to face the horsemen, his hands came up from his holsters, gun-filled.

His right .45 spoke first, but the left weapon wasn't more than a second later in snarling out its anger. And neither of those slugs was wasted. Each drove a hombre from his saddle.

The ranger turned slightly on his heels, snapping his right .45 in line with the hombre he had knocked from his horse; but he didn't squeeze the trigger. The loud voice of a shotgun seemed to lift the hombre clean off his feet and then drive him backward. The shotgun snarled out again and a killer who was throwing down on the ranger threw his weapon high into the air and then sprawled in the trail.

Norse felt the deadly, hot breath of a slug as it flew past his right ear. Swinging his weapon by a swift twist of his wrist, he pulled the trigger. But his lead was wasted. The hombre was dead before the ranger's slug reached him. The stagecoach driver was in the fight, and he knew how to handle his weapon. A split second later, his .45 weapon spoke again. The little hombre on the bay mare didn't know what hit him. He fell to the trail in a limp, still heap.

The other killer knew that it was a hopeless fight for him, but it was too late to back down. His weapon had spoken a second before, but without results. It spoke again, but still without finding a target. A weapon is a useless thing when in a dead man's hand. The ranger's slug had struck him squarely in the mouth.

"Fast work, fellows," the ranger said, reloading his weapons. "It would have been the other way about if we hadn't had surprise on our side. The killers were so sure of themselves that they didn't even bother to be careful. Now, let's look them over."

"Four, five, two, three, nine and the seven of spades," Thad said softly a few minutes later after he had searched the pockets of the dead men. "Just as I figgered—not even a King or Jack."

"Meaning that the kingpins are still running free?" the shot-gun guard drawled. "Wal, what now?"

"First we'll see if that strongbox is carrying any gold." The ranger moved over the stage.

"Now, wait a moment, ranger. I don't think that we should touch that box," the shotgun guard moved forward.

"In this case there's not much else we can do. Tim," the ranger said grimly. "Hurry, we haven't much time."

"Whatever the ranger says, goes with me, Tim," the driver said, stepping down from his seat.

Tim Beeson didn't waste any more time. A slug from his .45 smashed the lock of the strongbox and he threw open the lid "Rocks," he said as he placed his hands into the box. "Rocks packed in hay. The same as before. Not even a speck of gold dust."

"Are you carrying anything of importance this trip?" Thad asked, closing the lid.

"Nope, just the U.S. mail." The

shotgun guard threw the ranger a keen glance. "Why."

"In that case, the mail will have to wait this trip. We're heading back to Goldbar. We'll just about make it by dark. Turn that stage about, fellows, and don't waste any time. Goldbar is wide open to the Spade and the rest of his gang." The ranger was in the saddle before he finished speaking.

"The Sheriff kept some men back to guard the town," the driver yelled, but Norse didn't reply, he lifted the stallion into a swift speed.

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TRUE TO the ranger's reckoning, dusk was softly closing down when the three men topped the rise just out of Goldbar.

"From here on, fellows, we've got to be cunning," Norse said, raising his hand to halt the stage. "Let's hope that the Spade don't get suspicious when those hombres we drilled don't return on time."

"What's your plan?" Jack Page asked, making a cigaret.

"I've a hunch that the Spade intends to do the town over tonight, Jack." The ranger dismounted and rested his arms on the saddle. "We'll be there to welcome the skunk with hot lead. We'll be outnumbered. I wish we had a few more men."

"I know where I can get five more hombres," Jack Page stepped forward a few feet. "They're miners and they wouldn't leave their claims to ride with the posse. They're really too old for heavy riding, but I'd rather have them on my side in a gun fight than against me. They're living in the first five shacks on this end of the town. They would come running if they thought that they were really going to get a crack at the Spade and his gang, so close to home."

"Adding those five to the Sheriff and his men, and ourselves, we'll have a hot welcome waiting for the skunks," Beeson said softly.

"The Sheriff..." Thad didn't finish what he was about to say. The sound of three shots from the town at the foot of the rise caused him to leap into the saddle. He held back the ready speed of his mount long enough to speak to his companions.

"It looks as though the Spade is already at work. You get those five hombres you were talking about, Jack. I'm going ahead to try and give Spade some sort of welcome. Get that stage rolling after me, Tim, and have your holsters greased for action."

"Follow him," Beeson growled as he cracked the whip above the heads of his team. "That's all I'll be doing. That damn stallion is flying. Hang on, Jack. At the speed the ranger is going, the fight will be over before we get there."

"And the ranger won't be alive to tell us about it, if he rushed into the fight like that," Jack snapped back.

But Jack Page needn't have worried. Thad didn't rush headlong into the street. On the outskirts of the town, he swung the stallion to a halt behind some rocks at the side of the trail and waited for the stage to catch up.

"Leave the stage here," he said as the stage lumbered to a halt. "Tim and I will wait here for you. There's no sense in three of us matching lead with the Spade and his gang. All we'd do is scare them away. Get moving, pronto."

"I haven't far to go," Jack replied as he darted across the trail. "Give me eight or ten minutes."

Jack Page was a good judge of time. Ten minutes later he was back with five well-armed men at his back.

The ranger nodded his approval as he noticed the familiar way the gnarled

hands of the miners sought the butts of the sixshooters. Fearless gunfighters, each and every man.

The Spade is due for a surprise," he drawled. Then his eyes narrowed. "There's going to be plenty of lead flying about. If any hombre wants to back out, now's the time, fellows."

"I'll follow a Texas Ranger any day," one of the miners, a tall, lean fellow, said grimly. "When do we start smoking the skunks out?"

"Now." Thad rose. "We'll work our way along the back of the building opposite the jail until we find out where the Spade and his gang are. Let's go." Leaving the stallion beside the stage, the ranger led his grim-faced companions across the trail.

THE FOUR masked men who walked out of a saloon ten minutes later and turned towards the bank with six-shooters jutting from their fists stiffened with surprise when a voice challenged them in the feared and respected words of the Texas Rangers. They hesitated for a few moments, as though trying to discover just how many men were backing that unexpected voice. But only for a few moments, then, as though reading one another's thoughts, the masked men went into action, their sixshooters driving lead in the direction of the challenger as they backed towards the doors of the saloon.

They were only wasting time and lead. Thad and his men took aim calmly. Without haste, they squeezed the triggers of their weapons.

The four masked men didn't get even as far as the swing doors. They fell almost side by side.

But a little further down the street sixshooters blazed life from another saloon. Hot, searching lead snarled into the alley where Thad Norse and his companions stood in the darkness. The shots were fired blindly, but not without finding a target. One of the miners beside the ranger sank to the ground without even a grunt. Another gave a cry of pain and staggered backwards, his left hand holding a bullet-shattered shoulder.

Thad cursed bitterly. He had intended to spread the men out in separate alleys, but he hadn't had time; the sudden appearance of the four masked men had altered his planes. He moved the men deeper into the alley and dressed the wounded shoulder as best he could. "The skunks are cornered in the saloon," he drawled. "Three of you work your way around to the other side of the street. Cover the building at the back and both sides. The rest of us will find separate alleys here and cover the front."

The ranger moved into another alley directly in front of the saloon. He didn't answer the lead which snarled at him. He waited calmly for a lull in the firing, then he raised his voice.

"Hi, you hombres in there. This is Thad Norse, Texas Ranger speaking. Throw down your irons and come out with your hands in the air. You haven't a chance."

"Come in and get us, Ranger," a voice snarled back. "We can't get out, but neither can you get in. Come and get us, if you can?"

"We could get in if we wanted to," Thad replied. "But I don't want to get decent citizens shot just to capture you alive. I'm giving you just five minutes to come out with your hands in the air."

"And if we don't, Ranger?"

"Then I'll use these ten plugs of dynamite," the ranger bluffed. "Five minutes."

For a full minute there was silence, then a new voice yelled from the saloon. "Do we get a fair trial, Ranger?"

"Sure, I'll..." But another voice yelled from inside the saloon. "Yer dirty cowards, he's bluffing. Let 'im come and get us. I'll gutshoot the first hombre who makes a move fer

that door. Stay back there or I'll. . ."

The voice died out beneath the sudden bark of a .45, and as the sound died away a new voice yelled. "We're coming out, Ranger."

"One at a time," Norse yelled back. "Line up under the light in front of the saloon. We'll drill the first hombre who makes a false move."

They came out one at a time, slowly, sullenly. Thad watched them carefully. "Strangers," he said softly. "All of them. Five more of the gang. The Spade sure believes in plenty of helpers." He raised his voice. "Any one left inside?"

"Only Tex Rains, Ranger," the man on the end of the line replied. "But he'll have to be carried out. That slug yer heard jus' now tore away half his guts. Damn it, lawman, put us in our cells, our arms are getting tired."

Norse stepped out into the street, holstering his .45's. "I'm going to search you," he drawled. "And just in case any hombre has ideas, there are enough guns in those alleys to blow each man of you to hell." Slowly, he went along the line, his fingers missing nothing.

Anything of personal value he returned to its owner's pocket. When he finally stepped back, he held one playing card in his hand. "All right," and his voice was no longer a drawl. "You hombres without a card. What did you do with yours? Hide them in the saloon? Waal, it won't help you any. It proves that you must be the four ringleaders. Jack, King, Queen, and the Ace of Spades."

THE RANGER'S very weak bluff had the desired effects. Fear of being branded as one of the ringleaders worked wonders on one of the men. "Yer not going ter ring us in on that, Ranger. We haven't any cards because we're not regular members of the Spade gang. We only get called on when there's a big job on, like ternight. Harper, here, is the only real member of the gang."

"Shut up, you fool!" the hombre from whom Thad had taken the card snapped. "Yer're a yellow coyote, Smythe."

Nine men out of ten would have made the mistake of ordering the man called Harper to be silent, but the ranger didn't make that mistake. Many a man will forget to be cautious when anger overcomes him. Smythe was of that type. That's why the ranger stood there and allowed Harper to give Smythe such a tongue lashing.

And Smythe fell for the trap. He swore and cursed at Harper, then he turned savagely to Norse. Harper's the only real member. We only help out on big jobs."

"And that's mighty damn often," Harper snarled. "Yer yeller skunk, yer're in this as deep as the rest of us."

"That's a lie," Smythe snarled back. "The boys here and me don't know half of what goes on. It's all kept so damn secret. We don't even know who Spade is. We took our orders from Tex Rains. And I don't think Tex knew, either. He always got his orders from someone else, too, who used to sneak into our hideout in the rough country across the river. That messenger could have been you. We never saw the skunk. Seems funny that yer're always with us when there's a job ter be done. Anyway, yer're taking the rap fer gut-shooting Chips Allen. That was murder. He didn't even go fer his iron."

"Shut up, yer fool!" Harper snarled.

"Hi," Tim Beeson yelled as he walked toward the ranger. "I just took a look at those masked men we drilled. They're the skunks who stayed with the Sheriff to guard the town."

"Sheriff, yer call 'm," Smythe sneered. "He's that damn dumb that he couldn't outsmart a blind coyote. Your lawman is tied up in his own jail. Harper took away his smokepoles and

tied 'im up like a steer. Your Sheriff couldn't. . . ."

The sound of pounding footsteps silenced Smythe's voice. "So yer got the skunks, Norse. Good work." Sheriff Mclone, his face red, rushed up beside the ranger and glared at the prisoners as he buckled on a pair of .45's. "Now its my turn, hombres. I'll show yer who's the law here."

The ranger grinned, but it was a cold sort of a smile. "All right, Sheriff, let's toss them behind bars." He turned to Beeson. "I'll tag along with the Sheriff. Get the boys together and give the saloon a good search—just in case these hombres are not telling the truth. While you're at it, hunt up the Doc, and send him along to the jail. One of the prisoners needs attention."

"Yer won't find the Doc. He went with the posse." The Sheriff dug a .45 into the back of one of the prisoners. "All right, get along thar."

As the Sheriff herded the prisoners forward, the ranger paused to make a cigaret. "Got a match, Tim?" he drawled.

"Sure, Thad." Tim Beeson looked sharply at the ranger. "What's the matter, Norse?"

"Haven't time to explain," Thad said hurriedly. "Place three of the boys on the bank of the river directly behind the jail. Tell them to keep a sharp eye on the water. They may have to take a few prisoners. Stay there with them, too, Tim, and don't leave until I tell you to. Have the rest of the boys join you after they have searched the saloon." He raised his voice. "Thanks, Tim," and turned after the Sheriff.

"May as well put the skunks all in one cell," Sheriff Mclone said as he unlocked a cell. "They'll be easier ter watch if they decide to try any funny business. In yer go thar."

"SURE." THAD NORSE was standing near one of the cells. The laziness suddenly dropped from him as he straightened. "You have a very poor memory, Sheriff."

"What do yer mean, Norse?" A frown wrinkled the Sheriff's forehead and he dropped the keys of the cells into his pocket.

"A few days ago, Mclone, you said that that cell wasn't strong enough to hold a prisoner. You said that the bars of the window were loose. Remember?" Thad was idly rubbing his chin with his left hand.

"Oh, I—er—I was wrong, Ranger. Those bars will hold back a stampede. I had a good look at them later while I was thinking of getting 'em fixed."

"Sometimes you're a very poor liar, Sheriff." Thad Norse was standing relaxed, but his eyes were watching the Sheriff's hands.

"Just what are yer hinting at, Norse? Careful, I don't take that talk even from a ranger." The Sheriff didn't have that easy style of standing, but the very position of his bent elbows told of the speed which would be behind his draw.

Although the ranger kept his eyes on the Sheriff, he was speaking to the prisoners. "It would be a waste of time for you prisoners to try and escape through that trapdoor under the bunk in your cell. There are some mighty itchy trigger fingers waiting at the other end of the tunnel." Thad grinned and for a moment he shifted his gaze from the lawman to the prisoners.

And in thinking that he was taking advantage of that moment, Sheriff Mclone fell into the trap as he sent his hands holsterwards in a flashing draw.

The Sheriff wasn't fast enough. His weapons were still settling for the kill when they seemed to grow wings. The ranger's slugs tore the .45's from Mclone's hands.

"Damn yer, Norse," Mclone stepped backward, shaking his numb

fingers. "What the hell do her think yer're doing? Yer've got nothing on me."

"You're wasting time, Mclone. You know that there's a trapdoor under that bunk where the prisoners are. You're a member of the Spade's gang. You knew that Cal was going to be shot. I'm arresting you for murder and—"

"Yer're as loco as a—"

Thad didn't have time to really place his slug. He threw himself sideways and squeezed the trigger of his left .45 all in the one instant. His slug was just a split second ahead of the one which snarled at him from the muzzle of the small derringer which the Sheriff shook from his sleeve.

That split second in timing saved the ranger's life. The Sheriff's slug buried itself in the floor a few inches from the ranger's left boot, not because the Sheriff was a pass gunfighter, but because he was dead when his finger jerked on the trigger. Thad's quick desperate shot had struck the Sheriff squarely in the chest.

"Damn," Thad muttered. "And I wanted him alive." Bending, he went carefully through the dead man's pockets. He found what he was seeking in the top pocket of the leather vest.

It was the king of spades.

Thad was about to move the prisoners to another cell when the sound of hooves reached his ears. Quickly, he turned away from the cell and picked up the body of the lawman and carried it into the office where he placed it in a chair in such a position that the figure had the appearance of a person who had fallen asleep in the chair. Returning to the door that separated the office from the cells, he closed it and then moved the two kerosene lamps so that a shadow fell on the Sheriff. He stepped to one side of the front door then and reloaded his .45's.

WHEN TWO men stepped through the doorway into the room three minutes later, the leading man paused just inside the room and stood gazing at the figure of the Sheriff. "Everything went swell, Sheriff. By the time that dumb posse misses us we'll... Hell, Mclone, wake up. You're supposed to be out with—" The speaker moved swiftly across to the still figure. "Something's wrong here, Doc," he said without looking behind him. "The Sheriff's been drilled."

"Dead?" The second man rushed forward and bent over the Sheriff. "Dead as last year's skinned coyote. Something's gone wrong. Mike, very wrong. The dirty skunks mus' have doublecrossed us."

"They won't get away with it," Gray snarled. "I'll get the skunks if I have to follow them—" He stiffened and then whirled, his fingers spreading, clawlike, to grip the butts of his weapons.

But he checked that draw when a voice drawled, "Don't try it, Gray."

"You," Mike snapped. "But you're dea—" He checked himself and forced a smile to his lips as his hands dropped beside him. "Hell, Norse, I almost drew on you. When I sensed you behind me, I thought you were the hombre who drilled the Sheriff."

Thad Norse smiled coldly as he stepped away from the wall. "I am," he drawled.

"You Mike's eyes narrowed. He threw a swift, warning glance at the Doctor, "But I don't understand, Nurse."

"The game's up, Mike," Thad said softly, watching the two men as they moved apart. "The Sheriff was a member of the Spade's gang. I'm arresting you and Doc on the same charge."

"You're mad, Norse. Rangering has finally gone to your head."

"It's no use, Mike. The plot backfired. The Spade gang is broken up.

Those who are not dead are locked in a cell. This is the payoff, Gray. The Sheriff talked before he—"

"The Sheriff wouldn't—" Mike checked himself. "You're trying to bluff me, Norse. You've got nothing on the Sawbones or me."

"It's a pity it had to turn out this way, Mike. This is the first time, to my knowledge, that a ranger has turned renegade. That is why I was a little slow in figgering things out. I didn't suspect the Sheriff or being one of the gang because you were his deputy. That is also why I was so slow in finding out about that tunnel which leads from the cell to the river. But once I had you and the tunnel figgered out, the whole thing just fitted together.

"Go on," Mike Gray said softly. "I'm getting interested. So far, you haven't proved anything. The fact that there's a tunnel leading from the cell to the river means nothing."

"It wouldn't, if I didn't know about the songs." Thad spoke as though he was suddenly weary. "It would have taken me longer to work it all out if Betty Page hadn't told me that each time she sung a new song three times, the Doc was always arrested. That was when I really—"

"You seem to forget one thing, Norse. I came here to corral the Spade and his gang. Remember? I could hardly be the Spade."

"Nope Mike, you're not the Spade. But after you came here, you found out who the Spade was, and became one of the kingpins after you discovered how easy the pickings were."

"You know too much, but you won't live to tell anyone, Norse. Take him, Doc." The renegade ranger went into smooth, swift action.

It had often been said in the ranger force that there was only one man alive who might outdraw Mike Gray, and that that man was Thad Norse. Thad Norse had never voiced an opinion, but he had wondered just the same. Now, as the guns of the renegade ranger came up, Thad was no longer left in doubt. Even as his own weapons came up in that smooth, flashing draw, he tensed himself for the feel of hot lead.

But sometimes the speed of a gunslinger's draw can be too fast for accurate shooting. It proved itself in this case as Gray squeezed the trigger of his right .45. The slug which snarled from the round bore of the weapon a split second ahead of Thad's didn't find its mark. It whistled past Thad's left ear and buried itself in the wall behind him.

Thad didn't miss. Mike Gray was sprawling backward as Thad swung his other weapon to cover the Doctor. His weapon and the Doctor's roared together. Both slugs found their mark. This Doctor went backward with a round hole squarely between his eyes. He didn't know that his own slug had smashed into the ranger's shoulder, driving him backward and causing his weapon to drop from his fingers.

The Doc missed out on a few things. He didn't see Gray weakly raise his other weapon and trigger a desperate shot which burnt its way across the side of Thad's ribs as it passed under his left armpit. Nor did he hear the two slugs which snarled from Thad's .45, driving the renegade ranger back to the floor. There was something else the Sawbones didn't know, too. He would have been a mite riled if he had known that his own slug had driven Norse out of line with Mike's weapon just a second before it blazed, thus saving the ranger's life.

"Thanks, for drilling me, Doc," Thad muttered as he rose weakly to his feet. "Now, let's see what cards you pair are carrying." He searched the two dead men. "Just as I figgered."

Doctor Kay had the queen of spades in the pocket of his black coat; in the

vest pocket of the renegade ranger was the jack of spades.

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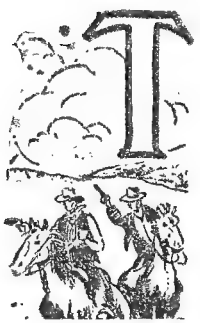

TEN MINUTES later, after having applied a hasty bandage to his shoulder wound, Thad Norse replaced the spent shells in his .45's with live ones and stepped out into the street. Slowly, as though suddenly weary of it all, he walked down an alley and around to the back door of the Miner's Haven.

"Well, don't stand there," Ma Keller said loudly as Thad knocked. "You know how to open a door, don't you. Come on in."

With a grim smile, the ranger opened the door and stepped into the room.

And looked into the two muzzles of a shotgun.

"Step right in, ranger. We've been waiting for you, Besty and I. You must be one hell of a fighter to be able to walk in here after all that shooting out there." The barrels of the shotgun jerked. "All right, Norse; in further."

With two barrels yawning at his stomach, there was only one thing the ranger could do. He moved into the room. There was another surprise waiting for him.

Sitting in a chair to the left of the door, bound and gagged, was Judy Hester.

"Unbuckle your hardware and stay where you are, ranger," Ma Keller snapped. "Judy's all right, yet. She will be only if you do as you're told."

"You're a heartless devil, Ma," Thad said as he dropped his gunbelt to the floor, "but you wouldn't hurt Judy. She's not part of all this."

"She's my passport out of here, ranger. You're going to call your own men and send them out of town on a false trail. I'm going in the other direction and your precious Judy is going with me and if there's any tricky business from you, Judy is going to get Besty's two barrels full in the face. Damn you, Norse, if you were just an ordinary lawman, I would have cleared out when the shooting first started. But I knew you would follow me no matter where I went. This way, with Judy with me, I'll be safe. Do as you're told, Thad, and as soon as I'm in the clear, I'll turn Judy loose. But there's one catch, Norse. For you. Before I leave, I'm going to have to kill you. Damn you, you spoilt everything just when I was ready for the big clean up. Because of you, I had to act before I was ready. All my carefully laid plans had to be thrown away and new ones made. If my original plans had had time to be put into action, I would have left here in a week's time with all the gold and money that Goldbar possessed. And no one would have found out that old Ma Keller was the Spade." The muzzles of the shotgun jerked angrily. "Everything went wrong, and you're to blame. Because of that, I'm going to kill you."

"You won't get far, Ma." Thad spoke as though he were discussing a horse deal. "Where I leave off, another ranger will take over. No matter where you go there will always be another ranger."

"*I'll* worry about that. I'll get away, but you're going to help me. First, you're going to send your gunslinging friends away then you're going to hitch up a team to a buckboard. And be careful, Thad. One wrong move and Judy gets both barrels square in her pretty face. You can't beat my trigger finger, ranger."

Thad Norse knew that Ma spoke

the truth. The distance between him and Ma was too great for him to risk a leap. Desperately, he stalled for time.

"You weren't so clever, Ma. You made mistakes all along the trail. The night you drilled Hoopiron Kling and left the ace of spades on the floor I knew you were the Spade."

That acted as a blow to Ma's pride. She stiffened and glared at the ranger. "I didn't make a mistake that night, Norse. It was possible for a gunslinger to have shoved his weapon over the sill."

"Sure," Thad managed to gain an inch as he moved slightly. "But there was a newly-dug garden patch about eight feet wide and fifteen feet long running along the wall under the window. You knew that anyone who heard that .38 would know that it had been fired within the room, so to cover that up, you claimed that the killer leant into the room. But you forgot that he would have had to leave tracks in that garden patch. You weren't so clever, Ma."

"And yet you didn't let on that you knew. You could have arrested me that night."

A GRIN TOUCHED the ranger's lips. "And the rest of the gang would have stampeded. I wanted all the gang. I had a hunch that you were about ready to clean up, but I didn't know just when. It took me a while to fit the puzzle together. I was riding with the stage when I discovered that the first letter in each line of the verse of the new song helped to make the words that told where the Spade was to strike next. I knew then why the Sheriff had been so anxious that night that I shouldn't see the Doc the night you drilled Kling. The Sheriff knew that the Doc wouldn't still be in the cell. He knew that Doc went out through the trapdoor under the bunk. The Doc had received the message from that song and was out getting some of the gang together. I have to hand it to you, Ma. It was a clever way of keeping anyone from tracing you through the Doc. As far as the citizens were concerned, the Sawbones was in jail sobering up each time a killing or raid took place." Thad managed to gain another inch.

"Damn you, Ranger. That tunnel was one of my best ideas. Days of work went into digging that tunnel, and a lot of hard thinking. I worked it out so that the mouth of the tunnel came out under the water and couldn't be seen. It used to fill up only to the level of the river. The hombres who used it used to get wet each time, but it was worth it. There was also always identical clothes to change into, each time the tunnel was used. It was a wonderful setup until you came along and stuck your nose into things."

"Success went to your head, Ma; you became too careless. You let too many hombres use that tunnel. Each time I chased a man, he jumped into the river and disappeared. I was backward myself there, Ma. It took me a while to figger out about that tunnel." Thad spoke in a friendly voice. He could have been talking to a friend instead of the deadly and cunning Spade, but he was covering up as he moved forward another precious inch. "Once I got the Doc and the tunnel figgered out it didn't take me long to fit Mike Gray and the Sheriff into the plot. But I worked most of it out while I was riding with the stage. You were easy, you gave yourself away when you drilled Kling's."

"You know almost everything, Norse, so you may as well know the rest. It won't do you any good or me any harm." The sneer on Ma's lips was mannish as she looked down at Judy. "Judy's brother, Roy, was one of the gang. He and I worked out the whole thing at the start. He was a clever man, but he started to become weak when it came to killing. I couldn't convince him that it was impossible to

separate robbery from killing, so I had to get rid of him. Gray killed him and took his place. Mike and Roy were the only two people who knew that I was the Spade. And, keep your eyes off the lamp, your idea won't work."

"Mind if I smoke?" Thad asked, and as Ma said that he may as well, seeing that it was to be his last, he dropped the making as he was taking it from his pocket. He managed to move forward another couple of inches as he picked up the tobacco from the floor.

"And Cal?" he drawled.

"Huuuummmph. Just another honest fool. He was becoming too nosey and had to be got rid of, but the stupid sheriff thought it best to let the angry citizens take care of him. Then you and Judy interfered and of course I had to go along with Judy to keep her from guessing the truth. But we still had to get Cal out of that jail, because we wanted to use the tunnel." A frown marked Ma's forehead. "And even then the fools made a mess of it by wounding Hester instead of killing him. Just as they made a mess of every attempt they had to kill you. We couldn't risk another try at Cal, so we moved him here under the pretence that he needed proper attention and couldn't get it in the cell."

THAD WINCED as he moved his wounded shoulder. Pain and dizziness caused him a few moments of anxiety as he swayed on his feet, but he forced the feeling away and steadied himself. He judged the distance between him and Ma Keller. *About six feet,* he thought. *I must get that shotgun in the first movement, and I mustn't miss.*

"You're more ruthless than any hombre ever could be, Ma," he said softly. A sudden thought came to him. "Have you harmed Cal?"

The Spade's face twisted into an ugly mask of anger. "No; thanks to you and your meddling, Norse. Judy wouldn't open the door to me until about ten minutes before you came. She wouldn't have opened it then only she came out to see you when you and I carried on an imaginary conversation. That's why I tied her up. You should have seen her surprise, Norse."

"Now," Thad thought. "It's now or never." He tensed himself for the spring.

But the shotgun in the Spade's hand jerked slightly and a mad light entered Ma's eyes. "I've just been thinking, Ranger. I don't need your help, and Judy would only slow me up if I was to take her with me. If I'm careful, I can get a nag from the stable and be well away before anyone realises that I'm gone. I'm going to kill you and Judy, and then set fire to the place. It'll be easy for me to make my getaway while your men are trying to get you and Judy out of the flames."

Thad saw that light in Ma's eyes and realised that she meant just what she said. "I can't understand you, Ma," he said quickly. "Everyone here in Goldbar liked and respected you. How could you be so heartless? I don't..."

"The fools," she snapped. "The miners used to come in here for their meals at night, talking their fool heads off. I could always tell almost to the last grain of paydirt just how much gold went from the miners into the Bank each week. That Bank must be bursting its sides with gold because it's all still there. Each time we held up the stage, we found nothing but damn rocks and hay. The big cleanup was to be next week, but damn you, Norse,

you spoilt it all. But you're not going to get any satisfaction from it. You're going to see Judy die now, then you're next." The Spade pointed the muzzles of the shotgun at Judy's head. "Sorry, my dear, I like you but you're ranger friend..."

Thad jumped. It was a desperate risk, but it succeeded. His sound shoulder struck Ma Keller and sent her sprawling, separating her from her shotgun, but she didn't even try. She just turned on one hip and her hand went under her dress to her thigh. That hand came up holding a .38.

The ranger was gathering himself for a second spring when a hasty slug from the .38 smashed into his left thigh and knocked his leg from under him. Fighting against the pain, he tried to regain his balance.

But, even then the .38 was swinging in Judy's direction.

Ma Keller never knew where the shots came from. Her stomach seemed to jut forward as the heavy slugs smashed into her back. Without a sound, she collapsed, but even then the man behind her wasn't satisfied. His .45 spoke again and again before he allowed the weapon to drop to his side, the smoke curling from the bore of the .45.

"That's what I would call making sure," Cal Hester drawled as he leant weakly against the door jamb for support. "Mighty lucky for you two that Judy left her smokepole beside my bed. I was almost too late to..."

But Thad Norse heard no more. He gave a weak sort of a grin and passed out.

It was some hours later when Thad opened his eyes. He just didn't know how long he had been unconscious, but he didn't care. There was a mass of red hair directly in front of his eyes and Judy's soft voice was talking close to his ear.

"...and the Cap won't be too pleased, I suppose. When he loses. Thad, that'll be two rangers he has lost in Goldbar."

"But Thad isn't going to die," a voice which Thad recognised as Cal's said close by. "So the Cap, won't be losing him."

"He'll lose this ranger just the same," Judy said firmly. "Surely, you don't think that I'm going to let my husband risk his life by going back to rangering. He's not getting out of my sight from here on."

Thad heard only drifts of the conversation, but what he did hear was very much to his liking. Reminding himself that he would have to send someone after the stallion and to call the men away from the river bank, he relaxed, a slow grin spreading into a smile on his lips.

But he didn't pass out again. He liked what he heard, and was waiting to hear some more.

He would have to make sure that Judy kept her promise. Yes, he would have to make sure...

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LAW WEST OF THE PECOS

The story of Judge Roy Bean

by JAMES HINES

SIXTY-FIVE years ago, on a Southern Pacific train, westbound from San Antonio to El Paso, Texas, one would cross the high bridge over the Pecos River. Twenty miles beyond there was a small oasis named Langtry. Here the trains stopped at a water tank for fifteen minutes, and the passengers could get off and stretch.

As one stepped off or looked out a train window, one would probably have seen a low, gray-beared, stoutly built man with a Mexican sombrero set at a "jack-duce" angle on his head, with a portly stomach mushrooming out over his belt. As trains pulled in, Bean would generally be standing on the porch of a frame shack with a crude sign on it which read:

LANGTRY
The Jersey Lilly Saloon Courthouse
Judge Roy Bean
The Law West of the Pecos
Justice of the Peace
Ice Cold Beer A barrel of whiskey

"There he is!" someone on the train would always exclaim.

"Is that him—Judge Roy Bean, the famous Law West of the Pecos?" another would say.

"Yes, that's him!"

"Well, I wouldn't have thought about that being Roy Bean."

Roy Bean had a curious mixture of qualities; he believed that cheating was good clean fun. He drank too much liquor, and washed too little; but once you got used to him, friends said, you would like and admire him. He was a tough old rooster, a godsend to the ranger forces in 1882, when they got him a commission as justice of the peace to help clean up the railroad construction camps.

Once when Judge Bean was holding an inquest over a dead body, he found forty dollars and a pistol on the corpse. It is reported that he calmly fined the corpse forty dollars for carrying a concealed weapon.

On another occasion, an Irishman was brought before him in court for killing a Chinese. Roy slowly ruffled through his dog-eared law book and found that it was homicidal to kill a human being. "But," he said, "I'll be damned if'n I can find any place where it's aginst the law for killin' a Chinaman."

He turned the Irishman loose.

JUDGE BEAN took care of any sort of civil action that was brought before him. He married young couples, baptized babies, settled estates and, without legal authority, divorced couples. When he divorced a couple, he would say that he only "aimed to rectify errors." Bean was too smart to be bluffed, and too tough to be damaged. He was a true frontier American; he called himself the "Law West of the Pecos" and made it stick.

Murder and horse-stealing were the two principal crimes in Bean's book, and both were punishable by death. Honest cattlemen soon learned that Bean was on the level, and the outlaws feared his court worse than the "civilized" courts on the other side of the Pecos.

Bean went west with the railroads where he found his rightful place. At fifty, he was living on the wrong side of San Antonio, and just another comical old man; a few years later, he made his name known from North America to Asia, and all classes of people from El Paso to Shanghai have chuckled at his wit. Probably only one person out of a million could have done what he did; but Roy Bean believed that he was a marked man—a child of destiny—and he had the high ambition to go with it.

Bean's official residence at Langtry was a one-room shack where he held court, sold cold beer and whiskey, lived, slept, and cultivated his people, who included a few dozen cowboys, mines, laborers, and men on the dodge.

His was the only law in a territory where two-thirds of the population were outlaws on the dodge. People said that when a man died and went to hell, he just moved across the Pecos. It was 200 miles to the nearest Justice of the Peace, so Bean ruled things pretty much his own way. But he never liked to convict anybody on circumstantial evidence, and released many outlaws who doubtless were guilty.

He kept clippings of himself, and, constantly tried to find a biographer to write his life story, but he never found one. Today he sleeps in a Del Rio, Texas, cemetery where his tobacco-stained beard has turned to dust, and his bull-like voice is no longer heard.

ROY BEAN was born in the green hills of Mason County, Kentucky, along the Ohio River in 1826. His parents—whom he never mentioned in later life—were Francis and Anne Bean. They were very poor. Bean took a poor relation's pride in his family.

He talked the good Southern way, and was always able to ignore the miserable circumstances which had surrounded his youth and to speak proudly of the Bean clan.

There were three of the Bean children, all boys: Josh, Sam, and Roy. Roy was the youngest. Josh Bean had got to California at the time of the American occupation. Before he was assassinated in 1853, he had become the first mayor of San Diego, and Major General of the State Militia.

Sam, Roy's other brother, became the first sheriff of Dona Ana County, New Mexico. Although Roy was never more than justice of peace he became the most famous of them all.

Roy never had more than three months of formal schooling, but he was educated in the rough ways of the frontier. Old-timers have stated that he wrote his name laboriously; but he liked to have people think that he was a great reader and kept his place all cluttered up with books and magazines. Some peope caught on to the fact that he could not read—very much anyway—because in performing a ceremony he would turn the pages of his book too fast to be reading the words he spoke.

Bean sometimes said his name was Roy Boone and that he was a direct descendant of Daniel Boone, the great hunter.

In 1847, when Roy's brother Sam came home from the Mexican War, he filled the Bean clan heads with glorious tales of battles, of the great plains and high mountains, of strange men and beautiful women. Young Roy was ready to go anywhere with him then.

Roy and Sam set out on a trading expedition to Chihuahua, Mexico. They journeyed from Independence, Missouri, to Santa Fe, New Mexico, with a wagon-train, with Roy working as a bullwhacker. When they arrived in Chihuahua, they found the Mexican people there hungry for American goods. They quickly established a trading post and sold everything including whiskey. The Mexicans called them "lost Frijoles." Roy learned Spanish, went to the bull fights, drank tequila, and lived the Mexican way.

Before long, Roy got into a fight with a drunk Mexican badman, who said that he would kill all the gringos south of the border and decided to start with Roy. Roy killed him. A Mexican mob decided to hang Roy, but just before the mob got there, a couple of heavily, loaded wagons pulled out of Chihuahua carrying the Beans and their most valuable goods with them. They stopped in the Mexican mining town of Jesus Maria, but the Mexicans had heard of the fight there and so they had to keep going.

THEY FINALLY found refuge in San Diego, California, where Josh Bean was fast becoming somebody important. He owned a business. Here Roy spent some time among the refinements of the best homes, going cock fighting, tippling around in carefree society with the pulquerios, and finally becoming their leader.

Horse racing, gambling, loving in the moonlight, living with his bigshot brother, Roy wondered where was the place called Kentucky. Had he ever been there? No one would have recognized him as the raw backwoods boy of two years before. He had filled out and toughened, changed by the months of adventurous life that he had led. He spoke Spanish, had learned the Spanish manners, and acted like a Mexican gentleman.

And so Roy became a dashing young buck. He dressed in all the gay trappings of a California cabellero, rode a spirted steed with a silver mounted saddle and bridle, and the California beauties simply went wild over him.

Once Roy met up with a Scotchman named Collins, who claimed to be an expert pistol shot. Roy was also a crack shot. When the Scotchman suggested that they shoot at something to decide

who was the better shot, Roy suggested that they shoot at each other. Collins was in too deep to back to out.

A big crowd gathered on the street where the duel was to be held. The police arrested both contestants, but Roy had winged the Scotchman before the police arrived.

Both men were put in jail, and for a month, girls stormed the jail trying to get Roy out, bringing him baskets and shawls with flowers, tamales, enchilades, dulces, wines, and cigars. On March 6, 1852, Roy dug out of jail and fled to Los Angeles. He found Josh nine miles away, at San Gabriel, where he had moved sometime earlier.

Josh owned the *Headquarters Saloon,* the largest one in town. Fights were common there and blood flowed freely. Josh gave Roy a job tending bar, and from that day on, Roy was never satisfied unless he was behind some bar.

Later, Josh was assassinated. Some people thought that the murder was planned by Joaquin Murietta, the notorious bandit. Roy, being Josh's nearest relative, took over the saloon. He enjoyed the power, money, pleasure and youth. He rode a 200 dollar saddle and wore a fifty dollar stetson. He went dressed in a Mexican sombrero, sash, embroidered pants, and red-topped boots. It took only a glance from anyone to tell that he thought he was somebody important—and was.

Like so many other boom towns of the West, San Gabriel played out, and Roy went bankrupt. Then he became involved with a Mexican officer over a girl whom the officer planned to marry. Roy appeared in the night and carried her off. The Mexican challenged him to a duel. Roy accepted and killed the Mexican. The Mexican's friends decided to take it up. They captured Roy and hanged him, but the girl rushed up and cut him down before he was dead; she just barely saved him. There were red rope burns on his neck the rest of his life, and he could never turn his neck without moving his whole body.

ROY THEN fled to Mesilla, New Mexico, and joined Sam. All signs of prosperity were gone. Gone were his silver-hilted bowie knife and red-topped boots; he had not enough clothes to cover his body decently.

Mesilla was a roaring boom town in those days; and when Roy loped his horse down the streets in 1859, it was a half-way station for the eastbound and westbound stages on their was across the continent.

Sam was an important fellow there. He owned a combination store, saloon, hotel, eating house and gambling hall, and claimed that the place took in 200 dollars a day. Sam was also serving his second term as sheriff of Dona Ana County, New Mexico—a job big enough for a dozen men, for this was after the Gadsden Purchase, and Dona Ana County stretched hundred of miles into what is now Arizona.

By now, Roy had had lots of experience in running a saloon, and so he and Sam became partners. Soon they decided to branch out. In 1861, they established a saloon, eating house, gambling den, etc., in Pinos Altos, New Mexico. It was a wild, bonanza camp in the mountains above Silver City.

The Civil War broke out and many of the miners enlisted; only a few people were left in Pinos Altos. The Indians raided the town. Roy and Sam decided to go back to Mesilla. They helped to organize a company of Confederate sympathizers who called themselves the "Free Robbers." Honest citizens called them the "Forty Thieves." Finally they disbanded, and Roy left and went to San Antonio.

San Antonio was then a beehive for Confederacy business. Roy began to run cotton down the river to the British ships ready off Matamoros, bringing back supplies for Confederate soldiers and civilians.

He was very busy during the war years in San Antonio. When the war ended, he went back to Mesilla. His glory had departed there; his property was libelled for treason. Union men had bought life interests in the "Rebel estates" there.

So he went back to San Antonio. In a few years, he had accumulated several thousand dollars in freighting equipment. He wore good clothes and smoked expensive black cigars. It was said that he lit his cigars with five dollar bills.

He had many rivals in the freighting business, but one by one he crushed them out. He had many lawsuits through the years 1863-67.

For sixteen years, Roy lived on South Flores Street, which became known as Beanville. Beanville was a poverty-ridden Mexican town and half cow pasture. It was sometimes called dogtown because the Mexicans had so many half-starved dogs.

ON OCTOBER 18, 1856, Roy married eighteen-year-old Virginia Chauez, a rancher's daughter. His wife's family didn't have much money, but there was royal blood in them dating back to an ancient, royal family in Portugal. People didn't see how a guy like Bean could have married a young, beautiful girl like Virginia Chauez. But they allowed he had plenty of personal attraction, when not drunk and cleaned up.

After their marriage, his wife found out his true character; she had him in court eight months later. Soon, however, little Roy was born and they succeeded in patching up the family troubles; anyway, they continued to live together.

At the time of little Roy's birth, they were living with his wife's parents. One business after another had failed, and they had a hard time keeping the wolf from their door. No one knew what he did with the three thousand that he had received for his freighting equipment before they were married.

Roy went into the business of selling wood, then in the dairy business. He half-starved the cows and put water in the milk that he sold. A story goes that while he was selling milk, a well-known San Antonio judge knocked on his door. He told Bean that if it was all right with him, he wanted his milk and water separate, that he was willing to buy them both as long as they were separated.

Roy, with a feigned astonished look, said: "Why, what's the matter, Jedge? What's wrong?"

"Well," replied the Judge, "my wife found a minnow in the milk yesterday."

"By gobs," exclaimed Roy. "That's what comes of waterin' cows in the river!"

While drinking beer with a close friend, Roy admitted that he kept a bucket down the river by the bridge and sometimes he would stop and pour water in the milk when the cows didn't give much milk. After all, he said, a man had to live.

Roy went into the meat business next. He would kill rich people's cows, take the meat into San Antonio, and sell it. He opened a saloon in the 70's on the south bank of the Medina River, failed, and then set up a saloon in Beanville. Again he failed. He then fell back on his second occupation—that of driving horses—and made several trips to Chihuahua by way of El Paso. Once he was nearly scalped by Indians. He killed a Mexican in Chihuahua and couldn't return. In twenty years Roy had come from a handsome, California cabellero to a funny, old man.

He decided to sell out and go to the wild country in West Texas, where a railroad was being built. He succeeded in disposing of his stuff in Beanville.

About 1880, Roy Bean and Bart Gobble with two big wagons, each

drawn by ten oxen and loaded with canned goods and cheap whiskey, headed out of San Antonio. They crossed the Pecos River on the El Paso trail about 200 miles from San Antonio.

Texas was a wild and savage region in those days. General Sherman once said that if he owned Hell and Texas, he would live in Hell and rent Texas. Bean was fifty-four years old then and in the prime of life. His hair was just beginning to turn gray.

TWENTY miles from the Pecos, hovering in the banks of the Rio Grande, was the town of Eagle's Nest. It consisted of several shacks and a tent community. This town sprang up around a water tank in the 80's. It was named Langtry late by Bean, who set up his frame palace and ruled the surrounding country for many years. Farther east, in the angle made by the Pecos, was the largest and wildest town of them all, Vinegaroom. It consisted of several tents strung out along the west bank of the Rio Grande.

Roy's first stop, after he left San Antonio, was on the west bank of the Pecos, very near the ford; there was no bridge there then. Everybody used "Bullies" crossing above the junction of the Pecos and the Rio Grande. There was lots of traffic there and Bean set up a one-man information bureau; he was guide, supply man, and a friend to all who came by. He stayed several months at Eagle's Nest and then moved to Vinegaroom.

Records of Pecos County show that Bean was appointed Justice of the Peace, August 2, 1882, by the Commissioners' Court. He put up his bond December 6, 1882. However, the records show that the Raw West of the Pecos was in active operation long before his bond was filed.

In September, 1882, a detachment of rangers moved to Vinegaroom and Bean went with them. He ran a saloon there. It was a tent saloon, headquarters for drinking and gambling and a hangout for the rangers. Roy once boasted that Vinegaroom was so peaceful and quiet that not a man had been killed there in four hours.

West Texas was a God-forsaken hellhole, where half the population was on the dodge. An officer of the law would not last half a night in that area; even the United States Army failed to clean out that place. It took a man with a steel heart to rule that part of Texas as well as Roy Bean did.

The Justice was completely on his own. There was only a handful of rangers to back him. His old law book was dog-eared and pencil-marked. It was "The Revised Statutes of Texas of 1879." Each year Roy was sent a new law book, but he made fires with them.

The railroad was completed in 1882, and Vinegaroom folded. Bean packed up his saloon and moved to another wild boom town known as Strawbridge. He had trouble with another saloon keeper and moved back to Eagle's Nest, took up a spot of ground that didn't belong to him, and stuck with it for twenty years in spite of hell and high water. To make matters worse, his son courted his hated rival's daughter.

Roy saw a picture of Lilly Langtry, the celebrated English actress who was touring American cities. Bean was then sixty years old, but he felt a gentle, spring-like stirring down in his old, battered breast. He nailed her picture on the wall behind the bar. "That's a friend of mine," he told all comers.

ROY NAMED his saloon in her honor. That didn't satisfy him, and he named the town Langtry. That was pretty hard for some of the oldtimers to take, but the Judge won. Before hardly anyone knew it, the Post Office Department announced the official, legal and permanent title as Langtry, December 8, 1884.

Roy at once wrote the actress and told her. She wrote that she would buy the town a drinking fountain. Roy immediately wrote back and told her that water was one thing the citizens of Langtry didn't drink.

"She's the prettiest woman in the world," said the Judge proudly. Having read in the papers that Lilly Langtry was having a romanic affair with the Prince of Wales, Roy trimmed his whiskers to resemble the royal beard.

Many years passed before the grand old lady was to see Langtry; but apparently nothing changed the feelings of her devoted admirer. He continued to write to her, although he never received an answer. Her picture always hung on the wall where all could look upon it.

"Law," Judge Bean said many times, "is the true dispensation of justice." Just what he meant by that statement is not known, but it is still quoted by the oldtime attorneys in Texas.

"By gobs, the court finds the prisoner guilty!" the Judge would shout. "Git the damn skunk a drink, Jake, and then take 'im out and hang 'im down the road somewheres." Bean's word was law; there was no higher court to which a man could appeal.

Judge Bean once divorced two couples the same afternoon, swapped them around, and remarried them. The Law West of the Pecos remarked: "I had one hell of a time dividin' up the children."

Marrying added a nice segment to the Judge's income. He performed marriages of Americans and Mexicans alike. He would do the job anywhere at any time; his fee was five dollars.

Judge Bean got lots of fun out of marrying people. He would be about half drunk when the time came for him to marry them. Sometimes he would prolong the ceremony half the night by having the couples promenade around and around the room or hall. By that time he would have studied up something else for them to do.

The ceremony would end something like this:

"Both of you hold up yore right hands."

The couple would do as they were told.

"By the authority of the Constitution of the United States, the great State of Texas, and the Law West of the Pecos, I, Roy Bean, Justice of the Peace of this district, hereby pronounce you man and wife. May God have mercy on your souls. Now, by gobs, you owe me five dollars."

On one occasion, two couples were supposed to be married and had sent to Del Rio for their licenses, which were to arrive in due time by train. The couples and the judge were ready, but the train was hours late. This irregularity didn't bother Judge Bean, however. He married the couples anyway. "By virtue of the authority vested in me by the State of Texas and the marriage licenses comin' in on Number 10, I now pronounce you man and wife."

ROY DABBLED in anything from which he could get money. Once while at Langtry he owned five herds

of sheep, each of which contained approximately 3,000 head. His son, Sam, tended them.

Early one morning a train stopped at Langtry and a salesman got off. He stepped into the *Jersey Lilly Saloon*. There was no one around but the swamper cleaning up.

"You grow nice grapes around here," the salesman commented.

"No," said the swamper.

"But there are some on the floor," exclaimed the salesman.

"Hell, man, them are eyeballs. They had a fight in here last night."

The town was full of toughs; outlaws on the dodge stopped there, since Langtry was located only a few miles from the Mexican Border. In spite of this, there were many good citizens in the town.

Beginning with a one-room shack on the south side of the railroad in 1883, Judge Bean moved into a big saloon across the tracks. It was a long building with a hall down the center and an L at the back. At the front were two rooms whee he did his buying and selling. Behind these were the sleeping and dining rooms, and in the angle L was a corral and wagon yard with sleeping quarters for the cowboys and teamsters opening off it. Special accomodations were provided for the women.

Facing the railroad property was a row of cages in which the Judge kept his pets, which included a bear, a mountain lion, and a coyote. These attracted lots of attention and caused him to get more trade.

His court-and-barroom was fifteen by thirty feet with the bar running crossways over the east side. Somebody burned this building in 1899, and it was replaced with a little two-room building, which still stands at Langtry. Most people think this is the original *Jersey Lilly*, but the oldtimers know differently.

Roy Bean reared five children, two of whom were girls. Although he raised his girls back of the saloon, he trained them to be ladies; they both married respectable businessmen. One married a construction foreman, who later rose to a high position in the engineering profession. Both daughters are now widows. The last information on them this writer can find is that they are living at adjoining addresses in New Orleans, and keeping quiet about themselves and their father.

Roy Bean was always playing tricks on someone. He kept a chunk of glass on the back bar. When mixing cocktails, he would drop the glass into the cocktail and make it tinkle, so the customer would think that he was putting ice into it. After he made it tinkle, he would fish around in the cocktail with his fingers, get out the chunk of glass, and replace it on the back bar.

He was always holding out money on people, especially strangers. Judge Bean loved a dollar so much that when he got his hands on it, that was the end of that dollar. One tale they tell on him is about a stranger who got off the train and stopped at the *Jersey Lilly*. He gave Judge Bean a twenty dollar gold piece when he ordered a bottle of beer.

"Yes, you gave me a twenty dollar gold piece," the Judge said. "By gobs, I'm tellin' you that any loco galoot from New York who'd pay for a beer with a twenty dollar gold piece ain't got any change comin'."

The young man protested, calling the Judge names.

"Oh, so, I'm a tightwad and a bastard, am I? Wal, now listen here, young feller, I'm the Law West of the Pecos and I hereby declare that court is now in session. I fine you nineteen dollars and sixty-five cents for disturbin' the peace. That'll learn you not to bother an old man."

ROY ONCE went to the cockfights in San Antonio, stayed two days, and came home feeling bad. His heart had been bothering him, and he had

been drinking too much in San Antonio. Some friends found him wandering around in his saloon; he could not talk. They put him to bed and called the doctor.

He died in his little bedroom behind the *Jersey Lilly,* at Langtry, Texas, at three o'clock, March 13, 1903. Before daylight, all over the United States people had heard that the famous Judge was dead. At Del Rio, they buried him under a stone on which was cut his name and the phrase, "Law West of the Pecos."

Ten months later, the famous actress, Lilly Langtry, visited Langtry, and a reception was given her by the citizens of the town, which Roy would have been proud of. She went over to the *Jersey Lilly,* and gathered up a bunch of poker chips and other souvenirs. She was presented with one of Roy's famous white-handled sixguns. She gave the town sixty dollars with which to start a library.

Roy Bean's body has turned to dust, but the legends of him live on. Around the lonely campfires in the Big Bend country, in the lobbies of the Eastern city hotels, and on pullman trains of the Southern Pacific, people still talk of the deeds of Judge Bean.

★

TOO MUCH LOOT!

Special Feature by Eugene Foster

IN THE DARKNESS, the Panamint Mountains loomed bleak and foreboding. Even the absence of the sun failed to hide the grimness of this California badlands, which lay near equally grim Death Valley. But for John Small and John McDonald, waiting patiently in the narrow canyon, this grimness had no effect.

Far up at the head of the canyon where the two Johns waited, was the new stamping mill belonging to Senator Bill Stewart. The Senator had freighted the parts for the thirty-hammer mill all the way from San Bernardino to Surprise Valley, where silver had been found. In operation close to two months now, the mill was ready to freight out its first shipment of refined ore.

It was for precisely this reason that Mr. Small and his partner in crime were waiting in the narrow canyon. Small and McDonald had a claim of their own staked out up in the valley, but to get any return from it they would have to do some digging. Digging meant actual physical labor. Small and McDonald had, unfortunately, an allergy to this sort of thing; the mere mention of the word caused these stalwart men to tremble and blanch.

For two months they had sprawled comfortably on the steep slope facing the mill and had watched the ore being sent down to the crushers. They had envisaged the refined silver piling up in the Senator's vault, and they smiled gently at each other.

"Real nice of the Senator to go to all that trouble just for us," said John Small.

John McDonald nodded agreeably. "You can always tell them high-class gentlemen," he said.

By keeping in close touch with the Senator's schedule, they were able to make a shrewd estimate as to the day the first shipment of silver would

start for San Bernardino. Wells Fargo had declined the honor of establishing a branch line at Panamint. Rumor had it that the reason for Wells Fargo's unusual timidity was the large number of individuals in the surrounding hills who held a philosophy similar to that of John Small and likewise McDonald. So, the only way the Senator could ship his silver was by Nadeau's freight. And Nadeau's freight held no terrors for Small and McDonald.

Now, as both Johns waited behind a rock formation in the wagon-wide canyon, the sky began to grow bright. After waiting all night for the wagon to show up, they began to have doubts. John Small shifted his shotgun impatiently.

"You reckon we judged it wrong?" he asked.

"Nope," McDonald replied. "Word I got was sometime today. It'll be along."

McDonald was right. Before the sun was an hour higher they heard the jingle of harness from up the canyon. The loads in two extra-large-bore shotguns were checked, then, as the wagon drew near, John S. and John M. stepped out into the road.

The wagon driver casually pulled his mules up. He was alone, and unarmed. "I expect you boys are after the silver," he said sociably.

"That's right," John McDonald returned gruffly. "Where is it?"

The driver jabbed a thumb over his shoulder. "You'll find it in back there."

John Small went to the rear of the wagon, climbed aboard. Then he stared in utter consternation. Five silver cannonballs lay there, and each of them weighed 450 pounds.

The driver turned to the two highwaymen, who were glaring angrily at their immovable loot. He handed them a well-filled paper bag. "Senator said to tell you boys he was sorry you went to so much needless trouble. He thought maybe this here lunch would make you feel a mite better, though."

★

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REAL WESTERN STORIES

Dacey was determined to have this horse, whatever the cost.

MORE THAN HIS DUE

by ROYAL BOONE

WHEN DACEY first saw the Appaloosa, he said he'd die to have that horse. He'd steal him, but damn it, he couldn't even get sight of him now. That damn squaw.

Dacey and Sutton were riding southwest that day, hugging the ridges, seeking the ravines. With the head of most any outlaw bringing good money in Deadwood, a horsethief would be a premium catch; might even warrant a bonus. Deadwood wasn't at all healthy, Dacey decided. Best they take to the brakes for awhile, join Rio and work the stages on the Cheyenne trail.

They were in Rio's country when they rode onto the Indian camp. Seeing that the Sioux buck was sick—typhoid maybe, smallpox maybe—they reined to detour the bedded warrior and his squaw. Then they saw the horse.

Beautiful, thought Dacey, wasn't the word. He'd heard of *magnificent,* knew it meant something out of this world. He'd never tried the word before; nothing before had required its usage. But that was it: *Magnificent!* All bone and muscle, that horse; he'd pack a man all day and feel none the worse for it. That was a horse for *Dacey;* he'd have it. The Sioux were in no shape to resist.

Sutton frowned at the Appaloosa. "A Sioux on a Nez Perce hoss?"

"Suspect they stoled him," Dacey said.

Sutton started getting down his rope. Dacey eyed him, lids narrowing; no man was about to put a rope on that horse, lest it be Dacey.

"Yuh ain't fixin'—"

As Sutton, shaking out a loop, reined toward the unhitched Appaloosa, Dacey caught the small movement from the Sioux buck. He whipped out his gun and fired three times.

"Learn to watch yur back, feller," he called to Sutton. "Yur're gona get it punched someday."

Now, thought Dacey, *that was a Damn fool thing to do.* That buck was lining his arrow on Sutton. He should've waited, let the Sioux sink his shaft, then shot him. That way there wouldn't have been any question about ownership of the Appaloosa. He'd tend to Sutton though—after the man had dabbed his loop.

SUTTON was within throwing-rope distance, when the squaw called to the horse. Seemingly alerted to danger, the Appaloosa backed away, his neck bowed, his ears sharply erect. When the squaw called again, he took to the brush as if spooked by a grizzly.

Sutton was after him for several minutes. He returned, clothes torn, face bleeding from contact with low limbs. His angered eyes fell on the squaw.

"Hadn't been fur that witch!"

Dacey said, "It'll be because of her that we get him now. I have a mind

that she can call him back here whenever she wants. I've heard tell yuh can talk to them Nez Perce hosses that way."

Sutton nodded agreement. "I'll work her over some." He dismounted and fashioned a club of his rope. "She'll talk him in, me takin' this to her."

Dacey started to warn him, not to get that close; the squaw might be sick with whatever ailed the buck. He had idea that no amount of whipping would obtain the Appaloosa, but suddenly saw where a good turn might do the trick. He'd see.

Sutton struck out, his lariat, hard as steel cable, catching the Indian woman full in the mouth. Blood showed instantly and a lip puffed as if inflated, but she didn't blink an eye. Sutton raised his rope again, his other hand pointing to his own mount, then to the timber and then stabbing to the ground. She'd understand that all right.

Dacey waited till the hand started down, then he shot Sutton—shot him twice, making sure to leave a load in the gun. You could never tell about a squaw.

Smiling at her, Dacey holstered his gun with a gesture of a man wanting peace. She duplicated him: peace was theirs. He made signs to indicate that Sutton had been a bad one and that he'd saved her from a beating to death: she agreed. For this, he indicated, she was to give him the Appaloosa. Now, she didn't agree—not violently but she let him know that it was no deal.

Dacey's mouth tightened. He nodded to the dead buck. Following his eyes, she spat at the Sioux warrior. Then Dacey thought he had it: She, too, had been stolen; she was a Nez Perce, a long way from home and wanting to get back. She had the horse to get her there, only Dacey had claim to him now.

HE TRIED trading horses with her and this didn't work either. In fact, she seemed shocked. He tried trading both horses—his and Sutton's—and then tried throwing in Sutton's saddle. But she was determined to have that Appaloosa.

Dacey, she'd find, could be a determined one too.

Dismounting a good thirty yards from her, he made a smoke. He'd think of something; give her a little time. Maybe she'd get to thinking he was an easy one, and call in the Appaloosa. He'd cut her down then, before she had chance to run the horse into the brush again. Dacey thought he was a patient man, but take this squaw—

After an hour—after he'd smoked through four cigarets—Dacey got to his feet. This was taking too long. He started for her, deciding maybe Sutton had had the right idea. Then Dacey saw him, the tall rider approaching them.

The man rode up, a Winchester rifle in the crook of his arm. The hammer, Dacey noted, was eared back.

"Heard some shootin'," the rider said. "What's the trouble?"

"A little Injun trouble," Dacey said. He lifted a thumb to Sutton. "My pardner got in the way of a bullet."

"In the back it 'peers."

Dacey shrugged.

The tall rider dismounted and with the toe of one boot lifted the head of Sutton. Almost instantly the Winchester came around and up. "Sutton was a pard of mine," the man said.

Dacey swallowed. "Yur're with Rio?"

"Yuh got him in the back. Why?"

"He got in the way."

"Come, Dacey."

Dacey swallowed again. "Yuh know me!"

The tall man nodded. "Yuh was pointed out to me in Cheyenne once. Heard yuh was a great hand to get a man from behind. Now turn around, Dacey; yuh won't see it comin'."

Dacey saw her doing it. The arrow struck the Winchester man between the shoulder blades. He staggered to

his knees, coughing, triggering the rifle into the ground. He died, cursing a back-shooter.

THIS WAS as close to death as Dacey had been for a long time. It left him shaken. Not knowing why, he mounted up. She called to the timber then; in a few minutes the Appaloosa showed himself. Dacey caught at his breath; his hands fumbled nervously with his rope.

While the squaw said soothing words, Dacey advanced with his rope. The Appaloosa stood rock-still, let the loop drop over him. As Dacey led him out, he saw the squaw gesticulating approval. Pointing to the two well-saddled horses, Dacey thought about himself a second. Thought he must be going soft, letting her take two good horses when he could take all; but for once goodness filled him and he touched spurs to his horse while the notion was still with him.

A jerk—a small tug, that's all it seemed—at his back, then a jerk at the buttons of his vest. Dacey glanced down and horror filled his eyes. The head of an arrow protruded from his chest as if it had suddenly sprouted there. He grabbed at the supporting shaft, missed, his hand closing on empty air. *That damn squaw,* he thought; then he died.

Dacey wouldn't know that he'd guessed most of it: She was, along with the Appaloosa, stolen from the Nez Perce. She had been traded several times—lately to the Sioux buck, a bad one. She was grateful that Dacey had killed him; was grateful that he'd killed that man about to beat her. The Appaloosa, even though she loved him dearly, was too small payment for all that; opportunity came with the tall man wielding his Winchester. She paid Dacey in full: then Dacey had to expect more than his due.

As Dacey had said: he'd die having that horse.

★

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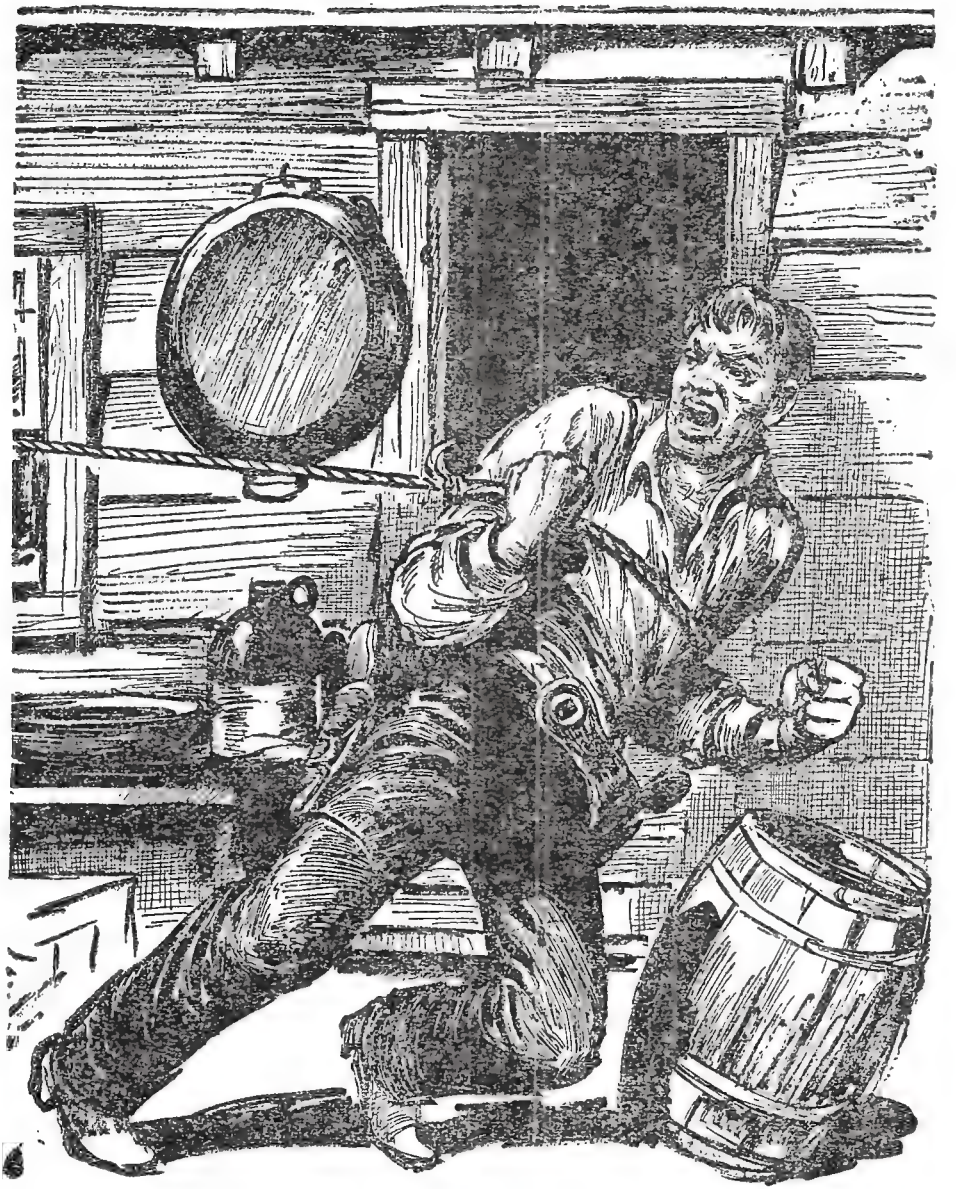
Sometimes a gent will confess to one crime in order to escape hanging for another.

LYNCH TRAP

by A. A. BAKER



SAM CAMP drove the team up Mercury's Circle Street. Under the wagon tarp, Wohaw Jackson's slug-riddled corpse bounced stiffly.

City Marshal John Wardlow stepped from the boardwalk where it widened in front of the *Triplesnake Saloon*. The Colts swinging on his lean thighs spoke an even stronger authority than that of his polished badge. The lamplight, leaping over the batwings, outlined his body but left his face in shadow. John Wardlow met the wagon driver's glare, then snapped. "That's far enough. Unless you've got a bill of sale for that rig, come right down over the wheel."

Sam studied Wardlow then raised his eyes and glared over the batwings as though debating with himself. "If you're City Marshal," he finally growled suspiciously, "then lead me on to your Judge Yontz. What talkin' I got to do don't need to be repeated twice."

"All right. Drive up to the front of the courthouse," instructed Wardlow. "The judge keeps late hours." Without a backward glance, the Marshal strode off ahead of the horses.

The courtroom was dark as the two men climbed the stairs and entered through the squeaking door. Sam Camp's eyes adjusted to the gloom as he followed Wardlow's jangling steps. It was a huge room, filled with benches that were stacked for the janitor. Against the wall a line of brass cuspidors caught the evening light. One lamp gleamed from the judge's chambers.

Silhouetted before the light, hunched moodily like a black bear saying his prayers at the podium, was Judge Yontz. He raised his head and spoke, "Coming in the front way now, John?"

"This fellow's got Wohaw Jackson's rig outside," began Wardlow.

"An' I got Jackson's body with it," added Sam Camp. A long pause filled the darkened room. Camp heard the snick of metal against leather and suddenly grew angry.

"Don't pull no gun till you hear me out! I'm about fed up with law officers. You pull that gun an' I'm ready to do some shootin' myself! Now both of you quiet down an' listen to what happened to Jackson..."

"Don't tell *me* to quiet down in my own courtroom!" boomed Yontz, his frame swelling under the heavy frock-coat. He relaxed, the light catching his bushy hair and muttered. "But it's been a long day—got my fire dampered. Go ahead, tell it all your way. Tell us how you killed Wohaw, then had the gall to..."

"He was killed," gritted Camp, "by one of Tom Washington's gunmen, just over the border of the Indian Reserve. I camped with Jackson, understand? Next morning, he took on into the territory while I come on this way. I wasn't gone half an hour before I heard the gunfire an' the roar of Jackson's muzzle loadin' shotgun."

"That old rag-mouthed gun?" the judge interposed.

Camp nodded. "'Ceptin' it didn't do him no good. He was killed dead with rifle slugs. An' when I got there, there was the killer just ridin' off. You see, Judge, I was in the willow bushes when this fella first tackled Jackson about the whiskey. Night before it was that he rode up an' claimed right out that Wohaw was runnin' whiskey into Indian territory. But Wohaw was wise to that old trick. Knowed half of Tom Washington's gunslingers is Judge Parker's deputies. Knowed too that them deputies—like Miller—filled their spare time haulin' in whiskey runners..."

"Then it was Harry Miller?" interrupted the judge. "You're claiming Miller killed Wohaw?"

"WAS GETTIN' to that," Camp answered, then continued in his own way. "'You're haulin' whiskey,' Miller told Wohaw. 'Not less'n *you* stashed whiskey in my wagon,' Wohaw threw right back. 'I'll just search your wagon,' threatened Miller.

"'Come ahead,' Wohaw yells at Miller an' draws up that old shotgun. 'Come ahead. Search my wagon. Maybe you'll find a bottle. This ain't no new wrinkle, stashin' whiskey in a settler's wagon! Then you kin hustle me back to El Reno for your fees. So—search the wagon but if you find any whiskey, this old ragmouth shotgun is gonna spit slugs like a kid spittin' watermelon seeds.'"

Sam Camp paused, breaking off his narration of what Wohaw and Miller had said to each other back there at the campsite. Yontz and his deputy were silently intent as Camp continued.

"Old Wohaw was really pushin' Miller, was callin' the deal. Miller wasn't able to stand up to that old man an' his shotgun. He rode off. But Miller come back next day an' bushwhacked that old man. Most likely, by now, they've driven his cows off but I can identify..."

"Just a minute, Sam." The judge matted his hair with nervous paws. "What's cows got to do with it?"

"Don't you know *nothin'* about what's goin' on?" shouted Camp. "Don't you know Tom Washington's buildin' a cattle empire by usin' Miller an' Judge Parker in El Reno? Don't you know that Parker's got fifty-nine men stacked in his jail sentenced to be hung? That settler's leasin' Indian lands is ambushed 'most every day by Harry Miller? Their cows is driven off. That Harry Miller buys five hunert dollars worth of whiskey ever' time he delivers a corpse for Tom Washington? Hell! Go down on your own Circle Street—right there in the *Triplesnake Saloon*—an' you'll find Miller —if you want him. *An' I'll stand witness he killed Wohaw!*"

"Aren't you the same Sam Camp who spent a year in the El Reno jail?" Judge Yontz began. "For *perjury?* Who'd believe you against Miller?"

"Don't you?" snarled Sam then added bitterly. "That year was for insultin' the court—not for perjury. Judge Parker—t h a t hangin' hog—asked me did I know I was under oath an' if I knew the penalty for perjury. I answered him right out; I told him that if I lied they would give me a gold star an' make me a Federal Deputy! He sentenced me to a year for contempt of court."

"So..." Yontz's tone hinted at judicial laughter over the plight of his fellow judge. "Wardlow'll bring Miller in. It's thin evidence but folks are tired of those goings-on. Maybe we can get a conviction."

"Well, it was Harry Miller," repeated Sam Camp.

A deep pause filled the darkened court. Harry Miller was Tom Washington's top gunman, and Washington would move heaven and earth to keep Miller free. He was needed—needed desperately in Washington's desire to control the entire rangeland. Needed to drive off the settlers, to steal their cattle...

"You sure?" It was the judge's voice, hollow in the gloom.

"Damned right I'm sure!" answered Camp.

"All right. John," the judge turned to the city marshal, "bring Harry Miller in." He spoke quietly and as the deputy stepped out of the shadow, Sam Camp took a good look at his face. It was heavily lined, a thin scar ran from his tight mouth, the gray eyes were bright slits above the narrow nose. In the bad light, the gray eyes became live black pools.

"He hangs out at the *Triplesnake Saloon.*" The voice of the marshal was soft. "Want him now?"

"Right now," answered the judge. "Take Camp, here, along. He can identify Miller."

JOHN WARDLOW pushed through the batwings, alert to every move of the dozen customers who were intent on a drunken argument at the bar. Layers of tobacco smoke lay against the saloon ceiling. Harry Miller, leaning forward on elbows against the smooth wood, was cursing the barkeep.

"I said *Gentlemen's* whiskey. This rotgut's good enough to swill hogs but ain't fit for nothin' else." He drew from the left holster and thumped the edge of the bar. The black barrel

pointed into the whitening but firm face of the barkeep.

"Judge Yontz wants to see you, Miller." Wardlow's voice cut through the raps of the thumping gun.

"What's the judge want to see me for?" Miller turned his flushed face toward the marshal. "An'—why Yontz? If *Yontz* thinks he's tellin' a federal deputy..."

"He isn't, Miller, *I'm* telling you." Wardlow's words bit. "I'm telling you to come on down to the courthouse. It's about the killing of Wohaw Jackson. We've got a witness this time. Now drop your gun..."

"Tellin' me to drop a gun that's got the draw on you?" Miller chuckled. "Tellin' me that a town punk is takin' me in?"

"I am!" snapped Wardlow. "Because there's a rifle poked over the edge of the batwings. Now, drop that gun!"

Miller flicked his eyes past John Wardlow's shoulder. The deputy snapped his sixgun from the holster. He held it at hip level but Miller, seeing no rifle barrel, pulled the trigger of his gun. John Wardlow had taken that split second to move one step to the right and fired, his slug returning the explosion of Miller's trigger. Harry Miller took the bullet in the shoulder and half crouched, blasted shot after shot in the direction of the swiftly moving Wardlow.

The Marshal, teeth bared, held his own fire until Miller in a drunken whirl stumbled forward. Then Wardlow laid the barrel of his gun hard across the gunman's shoulder muscles and watched the paralyzed gun hand drop, the smoking sixgun tumbling softly onto the sawdust covered floor.

Judge Yontz pulled the shade down until the spring caught, then let it roll to the top. It was late afternoon of the following day and he glared at the telegram on his flat topped desk. John Wardlow had seated himself in a cane chair to wait for the judge's anger to cool.

Yontz lifted the yellow sheet of paper and read the words aloud. "*'Hold off on Miller case. Arriving on the next stage. Signed, Tom Washington.'*"

"That's a threat," snorted Wardlow. "Washington doesn't want his gunman questioned; he might talk too much."

"Are we sure Miller killed Jackson?" the judge asked, his own doubts showing.

Wardlow smiled. "It's Camp's word against Miller. But Miller's done enough murders to hang fifty times over—even if he didn't kill Wohaw."

"Get Camp in here!" barked the judge.

"Don't have to 'get' me anywhere," a new voice echoed through the doorway as Camp finished opening the door from the alley and entered. "If you don't think I'm tellin' the truth, you're all wrong. I just come from the livery stable where I went over Miller's horse. His off-hind shoe—it's got a bent nailhead—" he crooked his forefinger in a notch, "sticks out from the side. That same crooked nailhead shows all around the place where Wohaw Jackson was stopped an' killed. Ain't that proof enough?"

"Maybe so," granted the judge. "Yep, guess you're all right, Camp. We'll lynch Miller tonight!"

CAMP STOOD as if he was stunned and John Wardlow half raised in his chair at the judge's sudden decision to bypass the law.

"Don't look so surprised," laughed the judge. "It's the only thing we can do. We got to lynch him before Tom Washington arrives with some kind of release signed by Judge Parker. Park-

er's got no jurisdiction over Pecos County, him being a federal judge. Then they'll stall the trial until Camp, here, somehow gets killed. They'll be rid of our witness and Miller'll be turned loose. We've *got to lynch him,* John. So round up about twenty men, fix it for dawn. Now, both of you get out of here."

"That stage," the deputy protested, "arrives in tomorrow about noon, but Tom Washington won't be on it."

"How so?" asked the judge, easing deeper into his chair.

"That's to stall us off so he can try springing Harry Miller from the jail tonight."

"Then we'll set the lynching up for right away. As soon as you get twenty men off the street. We'll use the regular scaffold—right out there."

Within the hour, twenty heavily-armed men surrounded the jail. Each carried a rifle and each wore a loose handkerchief over their taut faces. John Wardlow's black shirt was minus its star but the smooth pistol butts hung easily from his holsters. His dark gray eyes peeked out from below his hat brim as he breathed through the cloth protecting the rest of his face.

From the window of his chambers, Judge Yontz watched Harry Miller hustled out of the jail and blinking his red rimmed eyes in the bright sunlight bouncing from the white washed adobe walls. Favoring his shoulder wound, Miller was shouting. Judge Yontz raised his window a crack so he could hear Wardlow looping a hanging rope deftly over Miller's head.

"You're hangin' the wrong man!" The words brought a smile to Yontz's face. Miller needed hanging for the deaths of a dozen small cattle raisers. Cattle that joined the herds of Tom Washington after their owner's violent demise. "I never killed Wohaw Jackson! I was never down that way for better'n two months..."

"What the hell's the difference?" shouted a member of the mob. "You got a hangin' comin', the judge says so!" Laughter followed the shout.

"T'ain't legal!" howled Harry Miller; "I had no trial or nothin'. Wait'll Washington gets here."

The judge banged up the window with such force that the side of the building shook, stuck his head out and bellowed. "Why should anybody wait? You're a killer. An ambushing gunslick that's killed more men than you can count! If you never killed Jackson—who did?"

THE LYNCH mob quieted and waited. Miller quailed before the judge's anger, then words spouted. "Washington's the one you want. He's the one payin' for the bushwhackin' so's he can increase his herd. I killed some, yeah, but I never killed Jackson; an' any man says so is a liar!"

"Why you lying varmint!" the judge roared. "You know who murdered Wohaw. We got a witness who almost saw the murder—your horse there too! *That's* why you're being lynched—we can't hold you on any other murder—just for Wohaw!"

"Your witness is a damned liar!" Miller had trouble mouthing the words through fear dried lips. "I was four days north of the Indian line..."

"And what were you doing?" blasted the judge.

"Rustlin' cattle from the WY spread!"

"And who were you stealing it for?" the judge yelled. "Tell the truth and maybe we'll stop this lynching."

"For Tom Washington!" The slit eyed gunman shouted.

"That's fine, fine." Yontz was grinning now. "Put him back in his cell. We'll give him a legal trial now—*with*

twenty witnesses to his confession. We shouldn't have any trouble hanging him legally for cattle stealing." The judge paused. "And John—throw that Sam Camp in with him."

"What the hell for?" Sam Camp snatched off his mask.

"For being what he said—a damned liar!" answered the judge and started to lower the window. He hesitated, staring down the long dusty street. The rumble of racing horses broke across the sudden silence as the mob stilled to listen.

"Them's Washington's r i d e r s!" shouted a member of the lynch mob. "Comin' to spring Miller."

"Take off those masks!" shouted Yontz. "And hold up your right hands." Mechanically, he entoned, "By the authorization invested in my office, by the citizens of Pecos County, I hereby appoint you all as deputies. Now, deputies, hold off Washington's gunfighters!" He ducked back into his office to reappear seconds later with a rifle. Yontz had shucked his black coat. His white shirt cuffs glinted as he calmly opened the fight. His rifle roared toward the approaching horsemen.

"The next shot's for sure!" Yontz yelled.

"You missed your chance!" shouted the leading rider. Tom Washington held his sixgun in a hand that seemed big enough to hold a cannon. His calf vest belled open as he reined in, his gun belt studded with brass fittings. He fired at the window and the judge lowered his body to the sill, pumping another shell into the chamber. Before he returned Washington's fire, he heard Sam Camp yelling from the jail.

"That's the fella who really murdered Jackson! Let me out of here an' give me a gun!"

John Wardlow caught the judge's nod and disappeared into the jail.

The narrow alley echoed the drumfire between the local citizens and the scattered riders. The horses, saddles empty from swiftly hidden attackers, trotted aimlessly about the main street raising dust that mingled with the smoke from the guns.

Harry Miller, a rope still knotted around his sweating neck, broke and ran. Washington's men raised their fire to cover his escape. John Wardlow, crouching behind the adobe corner of the jail, reached out and stomped his foot onto the trailing rope. Miller fell, sprawling in the dust. Tom Washington exposed half his torso and tossed the killer a sixgun. Miller sat up, turned, and blasted the six shots into the corner where Wardlow crouched.

"Don't let Miller get shot!" shouted Yontz from the window. "A couple of you haul him back by that rope!" Too late, Miller realized he had forgotten to loose the hanging rope. He was yanked back, sliding like a squealing pig, hogtied quickly and stacked against the jail wall.

MINUTES dragged on, both sides snap-shooting. The judge, from his window, was able to crossfire Washington's men. John Wardlow studied the alley, charting the hidden gunmen. He refilled his sixguns and half rose to rush the cattlemen's guns.

"Wait!" It was Sam Camp. "Wait, but keep me covered." While the deputy hesitated, Camp cut the bonds from Miller's feet, and yanked the big man upright. Then slowly, he walked the gunman out into the alley. The sun threw shadows onto the hot dust and onto two shadows that moved down the alleyway toward the hidden gunmen.

"Throw down on them both!" The order came from Washington.

Yontz flinched at Washington's order to blast Miller, his own man. But that would also finish Sam Camp—the witness to Wohaw's death would die with Miller. Judge Parker would

see that Washington and his men would be protected for their raid on Mercury.

A blast of gunfire ripped into Harry Miller's body. Sam Camp wounded, fell to the ground firing and drawing a responsive fire from every man hidden at the end of the alley.

John Wardlow desperately raced across the alley and charged into the nest of gunfighters. His guns shook with each blast. Washington's men panicked and dodged back, exposing themselves to the cracks of the judge's rifle.

"Charge them!" the judge roared to his hidden deputies. The men sprang in John Wardlow's path. Tom Washington, shouting in wild rage, jumped into full sight and fired at Wardlow but before he could trigger his gun again, Sam Camp, crawling painfully from the wall, clasped his arms around Washington's legs and threw the cattleman to the ground. There the fight in the courthouse alley ended. Dust began to settle but the blue powder smoke rose high in the hot afternoon.

"NOW..." Judge Yontz sat behind his polished desk, moved the papers to one corner and thumbed the cork from a bottle of red whiskey. "Now is the time for a drink." He paused while he let the liquor gurgle into three water glasses. "And now is the time to piece the details of this mess together.

"You, Sam Camp," he shoved the glass across to Sam, who grinned crookedly beneath a bandage that circled his skull like some drunken halo. "You came into town with Wohaw's slug-filled corpse, telling us he was killed by Harry Miller. We stage a fake lynching party to make him confess. He confesses all right—to cattle rustling—not to killing Jackson. You had better do some explaining else I'll have John lock *you* up again." He pushed the second glass to his deputy.

"Look," Sam Camp began, "I knew that Tom Washington was behind all the hell-raisin' along the Indian border. He wants," he smiled and amended, "he *wanted* every cow in the territory. He hired Miller—but we know all that. Anyway, when I rode into Mercury the other day, I saw Miller in the *Triplesnake Saloon* and figured you'd been waitin' for an eyewitness to a murder, so I just claimed Miller did the killin' of Jackson. You threw me off when you worked the lynchin' angle. But anyways, Tom Washington couldn't let his gunman go to trial; he'd confess too much. Particularly in an honest court, where Washington's bribe wouldn't be accepted..."

"Wait a minute—thanks for calling this an honest court—why didn't you just tell us it was Washington who killed Jackson?" The judge's interruption was indignant.

"Cause I'd never seen the man before. It never entered my mind that he'd do his own bushwhackin'." Sam gulped his whiskey and sat silent.

"What about the bent horseshoe nail?" interjected Wardlow.

"I just made that up," Sam admitted; "made it up so's you'd believe my story."

The judge caught Wardlow's eye and sighed. "Well, she worked out fine. Washington's in the jug; Miller's dead. The county'll have to pay twenty deputies a day's wages—thank the Lord none of them were wounded badly! If you," he pointed his empty glass at Sam Camp, "was to be given an Indian name—you know what'd fit?"

Sam Camp shook his head, waiting.

"Man Who Lies In His Mouth—but not in his heart!" Yontz started to laugh, stopping just long enough to salute with the whiskey glass.

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WHEN GRANVILLE STUART LOST

Special Feature by White Eagle

IT WOULD, indeed be a foolish man who would dare say Granville Stuart was not a crack rifle-shot. Among the oldtimers, he was rated as one of the best. Folks in those days of the old west had to be good, or they often didn't live long. But, good as Granville was, he was nevertheless badly beaten in a shooting match with a Bannack Indian, who cleaned Stuart and his crowd out of all their ponies, blankets and butcher knives.

P. W. McAdow, who was a member of the Stuart party during the gold-rush days of Montana, spoke of the incident some years later. At the time of the shooting match between Stuart and the Indian—as the story goes—Stuart was using one of the first breech-loading rifles ever brought to the territory; still, he was no match for the Indian, who won on every shot with one single exception. The winning brave was Pushigan, a member of a band of Indians under Chief Ten Doy, a migratory remnant of the once powerful tribe of Bannack Indians of western Montana.

Ten Doy—or Tin Doy, as he was most often called by the whites—was a brother of Johnny Grant's youngest Indian wife. He was referred to by a white man by the name of Maillet, as the bravest Indian that Maillet ever saw. He was at the head of a band which frequented the Bitter Root country. However, he does not seem to have been the head chief; at least, his name does not appear in any reports of the Indian agents who had supervision over the Bannacks during the sixties and seventies.

Reference, however, was made to him in the *Weekly Montanian,* Virginia City, on September the 7th, 1871. This told of a band of Bannacks under Ten Doy, who had camped near Virginia City, and were on their way from the Salmon river country, where they had been for several weeks, laying in their winter supply of fish. They were bound for the Yellowstone and the Wind river countries to hunt Buffalo, and, as they said, to fight the Sioux and Arapahoe. There were about two hundred warriors in the party; Ten Doy, while there called upon Governor Potts in hopes of obtaining provisions and gifts, but in this he was unsuccessful.

Referring to him, *The Montanian* said: "Ten Doy is a fine looking fellow, and a pretty good Indian, and if not influenced by mean, and bloodthirsty Indians in his tribe, he will always be friendly towards the whites."

At the time of Granville Stuart's shooting match with one of Ten Doy's braves, in the winter of 1861, Stuart with his brother James, P.W. Mcow, and othe gold seekers were prospecting on Gold Creek in the Blackfoot country. McAdow, as he spoke of the affair, related it as follows:

"Having heard that gold had been found in the gravels of Gold Creek, (Gold Creek did not receive that name until later) Stearney Blake and I de-

cided to go up there, and do some prspecting. We dug holes in several dry gulches, and hit bedrock at from three to four feet. We found good prospects, as much as ten cents to a pan, which we regarded as encouraging.

"It was now the middle of December, and old Boreas was beginning to shake his sceptre; the freezing of the ground compelled us to wait until spring, to continue our prospecting. Moving our camp down to the mouth of Gold Creek, we put up our permanent winter's camp. While we were there, Chief Ten Doy, who was camped at the mouth of the little Blackfoot with his band of Bannacks, sent a runner down to John Powell with a challenge for a shooting match.

"James Stuart had in his possession a Henry rifle, which was about the first breech loading, long range gun brought into that part of the country. As Powell could speak the language of the Bannacks, he went to their camp to arrange the details of the match. The target was to be placed at a distance of one hundred yards, and to be moved one hundred for each succeeding shot, until one thousand yards had been reached. This arrangement being entirely satisfactory to the Indians, we felt confident of the simple, and cheap way we had devised of adding to our herd of ponies, and buffalo robes, for these would be put up for stakes.

"Early in the morning we rounded up our horses, and collected all the blankets, beads and butcher knives we could scrape together, and started for the Indian camp. Arriving on the ground, we found Chief Ten Doy ready for business. He had selected one of his braves, Pushigan, to do the shooting. This Indian had an old fashioned Dimmock rifle, weighing about thirty pounds. He had taken a piece of hoop-iron, and improvised a sight by slightly turning up the end in which he had filed a notch, this contrivance being fastened to the gun barrel with buckskin thongs; and by means of a small wooden wedge, he could raise and lower the sight to suit his fancy.

"Johnny Grant had built some cabins at this spot, and was living there with his family of breeds. For a target, we took the end-gate of his wagon, a board about three feet square, in the center of which we made a bulls eye on paper.

"Pushigan fired the first shot, and struck the bulls eye near the center. We had selected Granville Stuart for our marksman. Stepping up to the sratch, he took deliberate aim; with the crack of the gun, dust flew up beyond the target. He had missed the board, which was not very encouraging considering the close proximity of the mark. As the match progressed up to 500 yards, we had not made a single score; but at 600 yards Granville managed to strike the board near the bulls eye. Up to this point, we had been making very light bets, but now confidence was restored, and with a whoop, betting ran high. Powell began wagering two horses to one; but, alas for our hopes, Pushigan began more carefully to manipulate his hoop-iron sight, and up to 900 yards we had but one score to our credit. By this time our crowd was flat broke, with not a pony, blanket or butcher knife left. James Stuart bantered Chief Ten Doy to bet one horse against the long-range rifle, but, after carefully examining the gun, the wily chief handed it back with the simple remark 'Cultus,' which meant 'No good.'

"We had to foot it back to camp, arriving late that evening, tired and hungry, but sadder and wiser men than we started out so gaily in the morning. It was simply a case of Granville Stuart not being used to, or knowing nothing about, a long-range gun."

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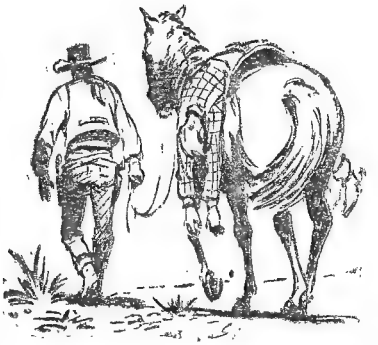
Strangely enough, people are more willing to forgive a bad man who repents than a good man who makes an honest mistake.



TERROR OF THE TERRITORY

by D. D. SHARP

DAN MOROSCO, sheriff of Red Butte County, glanced impatiently through the deep cased window of the adobe jail. Westward, on a wide spreading mesa, a rider was hazing a remuda of horses toward a pole corral. He banged his fist on the table that served as a desk. "If he don't corral 'em this time, you'd better go help him, Charlie.

"I can't help thinking of pore ole Hen," said Charlie, long time deputy under Morosco. "I never seen a braver man, nowheres, not even in the early days. It jest don't seem right for him to get it in the back from that dirty, no good, seventeen year old kid."

He drew his forty-four Frontier Peacemaker, balanced it on a finger, sighted along its barrel, then reluctantly returned it to his holster. "Jest once," he said, "Let him show himself to me, jest once."

The front door of the office banged open. Morosco swung around. Both Charlie and the sheriff dug for their guns, but neither finished the draw. The Seneca Kid stood just inside the door, a pistol in each hand, one covering Charlie, the other covering the sheriff.

He wore a black, felt hat which was pushed cockily to one side of his head, a blue shirt, gray jeans trousers, and a wide belt that sagged under a load of cartridges. His hair was black, very black, and parted in the middle, and it was long enough to brush the collar of his shirt. In the lobes of his ears were garnet ear-rings, which were fast becoming a legend wherever the Seneca Kid operated.

"Reach!" he ordered, "Or I'll blow your brains out!"

"Drop it, Sheriff," he added with his right gun almost touching the sheriff's ear.

Morosco released his single action .45 Colt. It hit the floor and spun around. It was a surrender the sheriff never thought he'd make.

The Kid's attention being fixed on the sheriff, Charlie risked a draw. The Kid drilled him through the temple with one fast shot, and the deputy slid to the floor.

"You make a move and you'll side

him," the Kid warned, narrowing his eyes and grinning like he had done something big.

To avoid the yellow eyes, the sheriff looked out the window beside his desk. The cowtown was quiet. If any one had heard the shooting at the jail, he had not made it his business to investigate. One lone wagon braved the midday sun. There were the usual collection of saddle horses at the hitching rail before the *Longhorn Saloon*. Except for these, the sun had chased the weak and the sturdy into the shade.

Morosco returned his stare to Charlie, who lay quiet, now, face turned upward, mouth fallen open, his lips gray and bloodless, a faint pallor spreading under his dark red beard.

AS THE sheriff recovered from the shock he boiled with anger. "Look at him!" he shouted, "A brave man—the bravest man I ever knew, and you come in here and shoot him down! You shoot him down! You knew he had a wife, and two babies, who now have no father, you heartless, no good animal!"

"Me heartless?" The Kid shrugged. "I got a real, soft heart, Sheriff. I he'p lots of bums what's down on their luck."

"Like you helped Hen Daily and poor old Charlie?"

"Now, Sheriff, he went for his gun; don't you believe in no self defense."

"Was shooting Hen Daily self-defense? Hen was a brave man; that's why you shot him in the back!"

"It was him or me, Sheriff. Him or or me. And I ain't heartless! You hear?" his voice rose. He was like a crazy man. "I'm grub staking a stray button what hit me up for grub over to 'Cruces'. Been feedin' and beddin' him. And he's grateful—real grateful! That's more'n you! I let you live, and you say I ain't got no heart in me?"

Sweat beaded the sheriff's face. There was murder in the Kid's eyes and their tiny, glittering pupils never left his face. Those narrowing yellow eyes were like a rattler's, tense and lifted for a strike. Unarmed, Morosco could do no more than stare back and try to think of some scheme that might give him a chance for his life.

Eight days, now, Morosco had ridden almost day and night trailing the Kid, praying for a chance to meet him, determined he would revenge Hen Daily for the shot in the back.

Now there was also Charlie to think about. And there would be other lawmen, other civilians shot down from ambush unless he put the locoed fool behind bars, and that *pronto*.

He had never hesitated to risk his own life to uphold the law. Given the shadow of a chance, unarmed as he was, he would have gladly tackled the Kid. But the Kid's eyes were alert, and his gun was fast and deadly, and the Kid had shown time and again he had no respect for anything but force.

"Thought you was too smart to trap—right in your own jail!" said the Kid with open contempt. "I'll kill you, someday, Sheriff, but not now; I need you to he'p me get out of the country. Jest do as I say and, in three days, I'll cross the border into Mexico. Folks around here'll be rootin' tootin' happy because you bring me in dead."

"First, though, you chase me right through town. Me on ole Yaller Streak and you right behind me, hell-beatin'-tanbark, on Charlie's paint-hoss. Ain't a bad hoss, that paint, Sheriff, but he can't stay in sight of ole Yaller Streak."

Morosco narrowed his eyes. So the Kid wanted to play cat and mouse? Of all the cocky, conceited, lawbreakers, he was the rotten onion! But what puzzled Morosco was why pull a fake chase through town? Sure, he was unarmed. If he overtook the Kid he would gain nothing, but neither would the Kid. And how would this help the Kid escape to Mexico?

"Now pick up your gun and hand it to me, handle first."

Morosco stooped, picked up the gun, and handed it to the Kid, who thrust it under his belt.

"Now you sit tight. Don't even bat a eyelid till I top ole Yaller Streak, then you come a yelling!" He ran through the door and down the steps to a buckskin pony widely known as Yaller Streak.

Morosco did not wait, but sprang to his feet the minute the Kid ran outside. He did halt a moment to take off his battered Stetson hat and bow his head in respect to his dead friend and fellow law-officer. Then he stooped quickly and took the dead man's gun.

WHEN HE topped the Paint pony that was hitched before the jail, the Kid was galloping up street, already leaving town. The sheriff rode after him, using his spurs. But he did not 'come-a-yelling! He rode silent and grim, determined to capture the Kid no matter what it took.

Slowly the Kid drew away and when he entered a distant *rincon,* or box canyon, Morosco calculated he was at least a mile in the lead.

The sheriff was well acquainted with the box-canyon. It's rimrock was a black-lava flow that towered above the lower slopes of red blow-sand, like prison walls. Big, lava boulders, wrinkled and pocked by the heat of the ancient eruption, littered the canyon floor where scrub oak, pinon, and juniper thickets were scattered about in different shades of green.

Of one thing Morosco felt sure, and that was no horse could climb those towers, even if it negotiated the lower sandy slopes. It looked as if the Kid was trapped.

Galloping across the prairie he noticed smoke, or dust, rising where the box canyon opened to the sky. It did not whirl like a dust devil nor race close to the earth like a prairie fire, and as he watched it thickened and spread across the high plateau.

If the Kid had set the dry brush afire, he was in a bad situation. Or he might have fired the abandoned headquarters of the Circle Slash outfit to distract his attention.

A few hundred yards outside the mouth of the *rincon* the puzzled solved itself. Hundreds of panicky horses charged out kicking up great clouds of red dust.

When the herd was out, Morosco rode between the verticle rock walls and entered the box-canyon. Dust fogged everything. It sanded his throat and burned his eyes. He was sure by then, that the Kid had boogered the horses for his own ends. Any minute he might show up behind a boulder or a bush.

With dust in his eyes he did not see the mangled body until he was almost on top of it. It lay, arms wide, head crushed, trampled beyond certain identification, though the sheriff had little doubt it was the Seneca Kid. Its long black hair. blue shirt, gray jeans trousers, could hardly have been coincidence.

He circled the body, riding slowly, looking for the outlaw's ivory handled revolvers. Fifteen notches the Kid had filed on them. He finally gave up, believing them to have been covered by the stampeding horses.

He drew rein beside the body and swung from the saddle. He stood a moment looking it over. It was about the Kid's size. The boots were a dead match for the sporty designs on the Kid's hand-stitched ones. All in all it certainly looked as if the young feller had at last out run his luck. If so, this was a day New Mexico would remember, generation to generation.

Morosco was duly thankful, though a bit disappointed that an accident had cheated him out of revenging his two beloved deputies. It seemed only right that he should have died by a law-officer's bullet, he had killed so many of them.

When he had gotten hold of his emotions again, he lifted the dead boy

behind the saddle and tied his hands and feet together so he wouldn't fall off. Then he mounted and rode toward town.

BUD FITCH, owner of the OK outfit, was just leaving town with a bunch of his buttons when Morosco rode in. They stared, bug eyed, as he passed with a curt nod.

"My Gawd!" Bud exclaimed, loud enough to be heard to the end of the street, "Look what Dan's bringing in!"

Morosco made no comment. He was thinking about Charlie and Hen Daily, and wondering a little why the Kid couldn't have been tramped up a lot sooner.

Bud jerked his head to indicate the town, then wheeled his horse, and led his buttons back the way they had come.

Citizens abandoned their beer and pretzles, their counters and freighting wagons. Runners high-tailed it to near-by settlements. All Malpais soon filled the street.

Men pulled the body from the saddle, snarling like wolves over a carcass. Women screamed and shouted glory hallelujah. Little children stared at the Terror of the Territory, who was now but a battered, bloody dead man.

Morosco offered no explanation, which, considering the uproar all around, would have been impossible to make, anyhow. He had no desire to claim unmerited glory. When things quieted down he planned to make a public statement of the facts.

So he sat the paint horse, his advance blocked by the ever swelling crowd; while down in the street beside him men fought each other for a scrap of the Kid's tattered clothing or for the privilege to help bear the mangled body to a near-by farm wagon.

They tied the body erect, sitting it on a soap-box just behind the wagon-seat. The long, black hair was not sleek and shining, as the Kid had worn it in life, but matted with dirt and dripping blood. The slender hips were twisted awry, one high cheek bone laid bare, though the big, trumpet like ears were miraculously unwounded.

Morris Ogletree, cousin of Hen Daily, climbed over a wheel and sat himself in the wagon seat. He drove down the town's main street with the mob at his heels making an uproar.

He drove across the arroyo to Old Town and through its narrow, twisting streets. He drove past every house in New Town, making sure every man, woman and child had their chance to see that the Seneca Kid was dead.

Morosco sat grimly astride the Paint and allowed the mob its celebration. He could do nothing else, had he wanted to. He had intended to tell them that the Kid had been killed by accident, and not in a gunfight, but the shouting and screaming had drowned his words. So he waited till they calmed down to make the distasteful explanation.

THE NIGHT dragged on as he followed the course of the wagon by the direction of the uproar. Then it came up the main street again, now flanked by fat pine torches, either side.

As it passed he noticed Bud Fitch climbing into the wagon. Peering at the dead, mangled face, before he leaped down.

He wondered what was wrong. Bud was shouldering his way toward him as though he had urgent business.

Morosco leaned and cupped an ear. "My God, Sheriff," shouted Bud, "You killed the wrong man! There ain't no garnet ear-rings. Not even any holes in his ears!"

The sheriff leaned on the saddlehorn and his strength drained out of him. "I didn't kill him, Bud; that's what I've been trying to say, but everybody's bellowing like locoed cow-stuff."

"Nobody's going to like the way you passed him off as the Seneca Kid, Sheriff."

"Now you listen to me, Bud. I was

tricked the same as you. Until right now, I believed he was the Kid. And now I'm madder than any of you. I know a way to even things up, and I'm doing it; but you've got to give me a little time."

The sheriff was over a barrel and he knew it. He also knew that any public servant could live uprightly all his life, then be ruined by one little mistake—maybe not his own. He had also observed that most people find it impossible to forgive a minor flaw in a good man, reserving pardon for sinners. His concern was not so much for himself, as for the hurt it might give to his daughter Laura.

Bud grunted and disappeared in the crowd.

Morosco sat trying to plan, but thinking mainly on the way the Kid had tricked him. He felt sure, now, the dead boy was the one the outlaw had fed and bedded, doubtless for this very scheme. It was all clear now—the fake chase, the body, the stampede. All bits of an over-all plan. If the people witnessed the chase, they would be prepared for bringing in the Kid's body, and if they believed the Kid dead, escape to Mexico would be easy.

So that left the sheriff but one out—to bring in the Kid. Which was the very thing almost every law-officer in the territory had been trying to do for almost a year.

Putting anger aside, Morosco left town and rode back the way he had come. Half a mile inside the box-canyon, he cut sign on the Kid. The sign revealed the outlaw had dismounted and led his horse through cane-cactus taller than a man. Morosco hobbled the Paint, took off the bridle and allowed it to graze.

On foot he worked through the chaparral to towering blow sand piled against the canyon wall. "He can't get away, now," he thought grimly. "This time it'll be a gunfight. That'll make folks happy."

In a juniper clump he found the Kid's horse. The outlaw's tracks crossed the sandflow and disappeared in the rocks. Which meant that the Kid was high up in the cliff, waiting to kill him.

"You're cornered!" he yelled; "you'll get a fair trial if you give yourself up. Come on down, Kid—hands up!"

There was no answer. None of the show-off bravado for which the Kid was noted, which meant one of two things; He had skipped out, or he planned an ambush.

Morosco skirted the sand, hiding in the scrub oak bushes, his boots sinking deep in the moldy leaves. Now and then he caught glimpses of the towering wall, its base buried in the drift sand, boulders big as a house tumbled upon its steep slope.

HIGH UP on the rimrock he saw a bit of blue that had no business there, unless it was the outlaw's blue shirt. It was beyond pistol range but Morosco fired hoping it might get some action out of the Kid. It did. A barrage of pistol fire rattled all around in the dry oak leaves. The Kid had the advantage of shooting down, and he made good use of it; the sheriff took refuge behind a nearby rock.

A great silence besieged the canyon. Both the sheriff and the outlaw waited on opportunity. Death was the immediate penalty for rashness or misjudgment.

Time was important to the sheriff. Already the sun was down, and twilight haunted the canyon floor. Darkness would end the chase, with probably never such an opportunity to take the Kid.

Morosco squirmed impatiently; he worked his way backward and peeped through a yucca bush.

The Kid was on the move. He had already descended from the lava sheet, and was working his way along a sand strip that was sheltered by great blocks of lava. Morosco could not see him for the thick growth of weeds and bear

grass, but he did see the leaves trembling as the Kid advanced.

It looked like a good time to go up and get his man, so the sheriff ran hard up the sand, his heels dragging as he plowed ahead with more difficulty than he had imagined.

He reached the first big boulder and, encountering no opposition, ran on to the third. The weeds high up where the Kid lay stopped moving. Morosco made himself small behind the third boulder which was much smaller than the other two. He waited, suspecting the outlaw was peeping through the grass. When the weeds moved again he jumped to his feet and hurried up-slope, and tumbled into a gully which had been torn into the blow-sand by a long forgotten cloud-burst.

He lay against the storm-made breastworks and fired at the moving weeds. He was now well within pistol range, and the approaching night pressed him to end the chase.

The Kid fired back, as Morosco had expected. When the shooting halted, the sheriff peeped over the breastworks. He frowned, suddenly worried. The moving leaves now indicated a changed situation; the Kid had turned around and was crawling back. Looking up the gully, Morosco saw his danger, for his nature-made trench lay at right angles to the wall; the Kid was crawling toward an opening in the rocks, where the whole length of it lay naked to his fire.

Morosco fired twice. The Kid halted, but not for long. Morosco hesitated. When he fired two more bullets he must reload. No doubt the Kid had counted shots and would rush to the opening while he reloaded. His only chance was to abandon the trench and reload behind the nearest boulder.

He fired the fifth bullet to keep the Kid's head down, and the sixth as he leaped out of the trench and ran with over-reaching strides, tumbling, rolling, wiggling into the rock's protection. There he hurriedly slipped cartridges from his belt but they would not go into the firing chamber. He stared at them unbelievingly, knowing that his last defense was gone.

Instinctively he clubbed his gun and got to his feet to be ready for any attack. It took a little while—possibly a couple of minutes—before he remembered that he had been using Charlie's gun and not his own. Charlie's was a .44 not a .45; a little difference, but enough to cost a lawman his life.

But Sheriff Dan Morosco had not earned the distinction of being the most famous man-hunter in the Territory by bemoaning his fate. His immediate purpose now was to escape, but that in no way altered his determination to bring the Kid to justice, sooner or later.

Now the coming darkness was his ally, if he could but live till it came to his rescue. But night, though near, raced against desperate odds. If the Kid suspected the helplessness of his situation he would walk down and coldly murder him.

He got to his knees and laid the barrel of the gun atop the rock as though taking aim. "This is your last chance, Kid. Give up and you get a fair trial. Hold out, and you die. You're just a boy, Kid; they may acquit you. I'll give you five minutes to think it over."

It was too dark now to see if there was any movement in the weeds. Five minutes passed. Morosco crawled down the slope and found his horse.

MALPAIS was silent and dark as a ghost town when he rode past its shadowy stores, on the way to his home.

Passing the last store building he saw a light at the county jail. The townsmen were there waiting for him to bring in the Kid. The very thought of their expectations froze him.

Unable to face them he turned from the road and followed a dim trail to a white paling fence and an old fash-

ioned, steep roofed house that was almost smothered by cottonwood trees.

Laura was waiting on the front veranda. She rose hurriedly and opened the paling gate. "Papa!" she cried.

"Laura, you should be in bed."

She reached up and hugged him hysterically. "Oh, papa, papa, I am sick with worry for you!"

"There's a light at the jail," he said soberly; "I'll be back soon as I can."

"Please, papa," she pleaded, "see them tomorrow. It's after midnight. You must get some sleep."

He yielded to her persuasion. After a cup of coffee, bacon and eggs, he went to bed. But he slept very little. A southwind screamed and blustered most of the remaining night. He lay stiffly, staring at the darkness, for he knew how it must be covering the trails with sand, wiping away the Kid's tracks so that no man alive could cut sign on him.

He rose at daybreak, and because Laura insisted, he ate a couple of flapjacks and drank a cup of coffee.

The wind was calm, now, but the damage was done.

"I've saddled Tanto," Laura said when he had finished eating. "Really, papa, isn't it silly to ride back there alone?"

He stood up, kissed her on the forehead, then freed her clinging fingers. "Now, now," he soothed, "are you trying to disqualify the last law-officer in Red Butte County?"

She only looked at him, trying to smile, and failing.

He paused at the gate to wave at her, then mounted and rode toward the jail, sitting very straight in the saddle.

THE JAIL was a low, adobe building with barred windows and a riveted, strap-iron door reinforcing the oak one that opened from the sheriff's office.

He intended to be inside but a few minutes, just long enough to glance around the jail. Since it was temporarily out of tenants he had given the jailer a short vacation.

He dismounted, dropped the reins over the hitching post and had started toward the jail when he noticed fresh boot-tracks in the new-blown dust. They had gone in but had not come out again. He recognized them at once; the Seneca Kid was in his office waiting to kill him when he opened the door.

Hoping he had not yet been seen, he took a couple of fast steps and flattened himself behind the thick trunk of a cottonwood tree, and not a second too soon. The Kid's revolver began gnawing bark inches from his shoulders.

"Come out and fight you dirty coward!"

"Give up, Kid; you can't fight the whole country. Give up and ask clemency!"

The Kid laughed crazily. He took a couple of snap-shots at Morosco's wide thighs and clipped holes in his trousers. He laughed again, louder, and forgot to keep down.

Morosco was ready. One well aimed bullet turned bad luck into success. The Kid grabbed his chest and tumbled into the new-blown sand. He had killed his last man, and now, with the evil spirit gone out of him, the Seneca Kid lay as harmless as a rag doll.

Sheriff Morosco blew the dead smoke from his pistol, reloaded and waited, half expecting the Kid to shoot again.

The night wind that he had cursed had saved his life, for it had cleaned the yard of the townsmen's tracks and dusted the walk so that the print of the Kid's boots attracted his attention.

Laura came running up the slope. She threw her arms around him breathlessly.

"It's all over," he said; "he'll bother no one ever again." He glanced down at the rigid, bloodless face. "He planned to finish me from the front window, and he would have—but for the wind last night."

★

The Strange Case of Caleb Crinn

by Edward Garner

Caleb Crinn was against all sin,
And all kinds of fun was such,
It made him sad when a man was glad,
And he grieved on such matters much.
His face was dour, and his manner sour,
And the substance of thought he'd found
Was that the world had gone to hell—
Only he was heaven-bound!

He shuddered at thought of a cool glass bought
At the bar of Big Mike's saloon,
And Gambler Staine gave him a pain
For which he could find no boon;
When cards were played Crinn was dismayed,
And dice were the devil's own,
And Crinn would weep for the erring sheep,
And sit by himself and groan!

Crinn's mouth hung low in the status quo,
And his lips were blue and thin,
And his mustache drooped as his sad mind grouped
The various types of sin.
At Christmas time he was like a lime
That was downcast and sour and glum—
For he had heard in a whispered word
That fruit cakes were made with rum!

Irongut McDade one day waylaid
Crinn on the town's main street,
And told him near was some fine root beer,
And he'd like to stand him treat.
Then McDade spiked the beer so liked
By the temperance folks and Crinn,
And Crinn would drink and McDade would wink—
The beer was three-quarters gin!
Crinn smacked his lips as he took the sips

That tasted like one sip more,
And he drank his fill, he drank until
He couldn't get out of the door!
Then McDade led Crinn to his bed,
And left him to sober there;
When he awoke he had slipped his yoke—
The world looked fine and fair!

Crinn asked for work with the smiling Turk
Who owned the *Golden Mug,*
And he poured the rye with a shining eye,
And took a frequent slug;
But fate required that he be fired,
And the Turk gave him the air,
For the thirsty Crinn had been deep in sin—
He had drunk up the profits there!

Benny was tired of being a big-rep gunslinger . .

A RANCH IN THE VALLEY

by EUGENE HARSCH

THE MONTANA hills simmered yellow in the early morning sun. Beneath the tall weeds, brown grasshoppers warmed their backs in streaks of orange sunlight. The dew on the leaves gathered into little drops and struggled down the stems and was soaked up by the crumbly, sandy earth.

His horse stood motionless in the unsure light. Its dusty yellow coat was almost invisible against the hills. Beside the man and the horse, thick mineral water sparkled and flashed in the little river.

Benny woke up with his senses immediately alert to the danger. The dreaded and exciting hunted feeling always had this effect. With nothing to fear he was as slow and relaxed as a ranch-hand, but now there was the tenseness of the hunt. And he was the one being hunted. But he knew it would be hours before the posse would find his tracks where he had left the hard-packed coach path.

Benny went to the river bank and dipped his tin pan in the water and drank it off. He refilled the pan with water, poured it over his black hair and raked it straight back with his fingers. Then he walked his horse to the water. It drank easily for the night had been cool, and it was not yet thirsty. "Drink plenty, old boy," he said, patting puffs of dust from the stiff yellow hair on its down-curved neck. "You're going to need it today."

He went back to his little bundle of equipment and poured a puddle of molasses into a pan. Setting the pan on the ground, he broke a huge chunk of bread from a loaf. When he looked back there was a grasshopper stiffly plucking its way across the molasses. He picked it up, the warming molasses dripping from its legs, and threw it into the weeds. It stuck to a crisp leaf before it plopped to the ground where loose sand glued itself to its body.

The brittle bread chunk scraped along the bottom of the tin pan as Benny wiped up the molasses. He finished eating and washed the pan in the stream. Then he rolled his equipment in the thin blankets and packed the bundle behind his saddle. Swinging his tall body into place he settled himself for the long ride to keep dis-

tance between himself and the sheriff.

True to a man's natural tendency, Benny kept to the high ground and climbing higher. As he rode he thought again of what had happened at the tavern two nights ago. The scene was playing itself over and over in his mind. He thought of how he had been minding his own business at the bar. Then the kid with big ideas had come in—the kid who wanted to make a man out of himself. Benny cursed his reputation as a gunslinger as he saw the young kid again in his mind—standing there in front of him with his gunhand ready, forcing him to draw. He saw himself setting his whiskey glass on the bar. He heard himself saying "Oh, hell," as he shot the boy.

He was still thinking about it when he reached the foot of the mountains at noon. Why'd the kid wreck it? He had just wanted to be left alone. It had all been repeated so often, only he had killed *men* before. It makes a difference when you kill a boy.

He thought of the years he had been forced to live up to the name he had foolishly made for himself in his home town, before he had been run out. How many men had he killed since then? He didn't know because he never counted them. Each new killing was something to be forgotten, not to be totalled up in neat notches on his .44 handle to take pride in. Each killing was another necessity of life. He was a gunslinger; everybody knew that. And he was the best of them all. He was someone to be looked up to and feared; someone to be beaten and surpassed.

TO THIS life Benny had resigned himself years ago. It had meant giving up the little ranch in the valley south of his home town. And especially it had meant giving up Alice, the girl he was going to marry. He could see her face as she pleaded with him to control his temper for once—not to go into town the day he had killed the first man over a grievance he couldn't even remember.

At the top edge of the timber line Benny slid from his horse and looped the reins around a tree by the side of a creek. Here in a green clearing there would be plenty of food and water for his horse.

Then he began the almost vertical climb up the grey rocks that rimmed the top of the mountain. Two hours later he reached a flat landing flanked by sharp, steep boulders that stood some fifty or sixty feet high and split the summit in a narrow gap. It was here that he prepared for the posse.

"They'll have to come this way," he thought. "Coming through this gap I can get them one at a time. Hell, I'll just wait here and kill them all."

He set up his camp comfortably at the far end of the pass. After checking his heavy revolvers there was nothing left to do. At last he decided to look for the sheriff and his men. From his side of the pass it was an easy matter to climb to the top of the high rock wall. At the top he moved carefully to the edge that faced the way he had come up the mountain. The belt of trees at the base of the cliffs looked far away and unreal. Finally he picked out the creek and the yellow movement of his horse, still nibbling on the grass. He did not see the posse.

"Wonder how many of them there are," he thought. "It won't matter, though. A few more one way or the other won't make any difference."

When he turned to go back down to his post he was staggered by a sight he had never dreamed of seeing again. Below him to the north, low in a rolling heaven of wooded hills was his home town. And closer, between his town and the mountains he saw what would have been his ranch. It huddled quietly with a white thread of smoke climbing straight out of the chimney in the stillness.

His town. His ranch. His sweetheart. The only things that made life worthwhile were all before his eyes. The only things he had ever wanted and had been forced to run away from. Maybe he could have them yet. Maybe the last ten years of his life could be forgotten, obliterated. In that moment he knew a happiness that coursed through him, washing out his evil and leaving a thing of beauty —the man he had been ten years ago. In this way Benny stood for a long time—stunned by the realization of a life he had wasted. As far as man is able to change, Benny changed while he stood looking at his home.

WHEN HE again looked over the south edge of the boulder there were six horses where his had been alone. He soon picked out the five specks that were the men of the posse, moving slowly up the steep rocks on the same path he had taken.

Benny waited for them at the end of the gap. He had decided to give himself up. It would be the first good thing he had done in ten years. But a man has to change sometime. You can't fight the whole world. You can't kill everybody. It would take courage to give himself up, but Benny had plenty of that. It would take more; it would take humility. But he knew he had to give up sometime. And maybe this way there would be another chance for his ranch in the valley.

Benny waited until the voices of the five men funneled into the pass. He could hear them clearly in the still air before he saw them.

"No man's gonna get away with shootin' kids in this part of the country," one of them said.

"He's been on the loose too long," another man said.

Benny walked forward between the two steep wedges of stone. His sixguns rested heavily on his hips. He stood at the rock-framed entrance to the gap. Four men of the posse were visible not twenty yards down the path. The sheriff was the first man in the grop. A heavy-set man puffed along the trail behind him. One of the other men was a tall and bony storekeeper. The last man was a muscular ranchman. Like the outlaw they all had a three day's growth of beard.

From somewhere behind came the thin voice of a younger man. "He's rough, Boys; it won't be no easy job gettin' him."

"Some of us are bound to get it before we take him," the sheriff said, "but we're expecting that. You can go on home if you think it might be safer."

"I only meant," the young voice answered, "we gotta be careful. Either we get him or he gets us. He's got the advantage. He could be waiting for us anyplace."

"We'll worry about that when we find him," the ranchman said.

Suddenly the four men saw Benny. They stopped and stared unbelieving at the big man in the rock opening. There was a long, frightening second of dead silence.

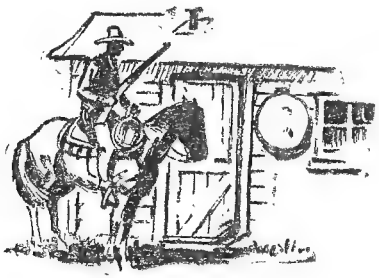
Benny calmly, almost amusedly watched the four shocked men. He seemed like a god to the frightened men—a god half-smiling at their awkward, frozen positions. Then in his low, deliberate way of talking he began: "Sheriff, I..."

The crashing blast of a sixgun in the unsteady hand of the fifth man split the eardrums of the others. As Benny spun backwards beneath the impact of the thumping, pounding lead his hand instinctively flashed to his .44. But the five guns of the posse roared and echoed and roared again like thunder in the mouth of the pass. Benny fell to the ground, the unfired weapon still in his hand.

The sheriff walked forward and stood above Benny's shattered body. "Wonder what he was gonna say."

★

Jess Whaley was marked for bushwhack lead, and if they got him, then the last witness against Bascomb and his renegades would be gone. But who would try to kill a dead man?



THE LAST WITNESS

by KATHERINE McCOMB

JESS WHALEY came awake with a curious feeling, as if something were wrong. For a minute he lay perfectly still in his bunk, listening intently. But only the soft sighing of the wind and the drowsy chirps of insects rewarded him.

He eased over, his eyes searching the shadows. Nothing, except the dim outlines of his meager furniture; his own breathing was the only sound in the room. Then he turned his head toward the one small window, and even his breathing stopped for a moment: A deep red glow stained the window glass, though he was positive it was not yet dawn.

He leaped from bed and hurried to the window. A startled oath jerked from his lips at sight of the crimson reflection of flames against the black backdrop of night. It had come—the long-threatened war between the cattlemen and the nesters. And that fire looked dangerously near the Edwards' homestead, where Ann lived.

Jess made a world's record getting into his clothes, if anyone had been there to clock him. Last he buckled on a sixshooter with a well-filled cartridge belt. As he hastened to the corral to saddle his horse, he could see the blaze leaping high and smell the pungent odor of smoke.

He put his big bay at a mile-eating lope toward the Edwards' homestead, about seven miles east of his own quarter section. But before he reached there he discovered that the fire was a little to the south—Fred King's claim,

two miles from the Edwards' place. With a feeling of relief he turned in that direction.

As he approached the house, now a sheet of roaring flames and fiery sparks, Sadie King came stumbling to meet him, face and hands black with smoke. Her clothing was scorched, her hair singed in a desperate effort to save a few pitiful belongings, now piled in a heap on the barren ground.

"Oh, Jess," she wailed, tears streaming down her grimed face, horror choking her voice. "They took Fred—they're going to hang him for a rustler—"

"Who—who did it?"

"A bunch of men. They had their faces covered with red bandanas, but I could swear it was Newt Bascomb and his hired gunmen. You know how he's been tryin' to run us out—. And I saw a Boxed B brand on one horse—"

Whaley nodded. Ever since the nesters started coming in, the cattlemen had been on the prod, accusing the settlers of rustling, running off their farm stock and threatening to burn them out. Newt Bascomb, owner of the big Boxed B outfit, was the most bold of the lot. He had imported gunmen and swore that he would run every rustling nester out of Surprise Valley, where his cattle had once grazed on free government land.

"How many?" Jess asked soberly.

"Ten or twelve," the woman told him, eyes tragic in the glow of the savage, devouring flames. "They called Fred to the door, accused him of rustling cattle and put a rope around his neck. I followed them as far as the corral, begging and pleading with them to let him go. You know Fred never stole anything—" again grief choked her. "They—laughed at me," she continued a minute later. "Said they had to make an example of somebody. Then a couple of fellows threw lighted torches on the roof and they rode away, still laughing."

She was sobbing again, her plump body trembling at the remembered horror. "Oh, why did we ever come to this awful country?" she wailed. "Fred had a good job teaching back in Iowa—but he wanted a farm—"

JESS' THIN face had gone flint-hard with anger as he listened to the woman's story; and fire, hotter than the dying flames of the nester shack, burned in his dark eyes.

"Take it easy, Mrs. King," he said, patting her shoulder awkwardly. "Which way did the varmints go?"

"That way—towards the Edwards place," she pointed.

Jess jerked erect, a foreboding of more trouble suddenly possessing him.

"Reckon I'll be ridin'," he said and swung into the saddle.

As he rode into the Edwards yard, the house stood dark and silent. Maybe his fears had been unfounded; maybe the raiders hadn't come here, after all.

He gave a loud hail and waited. But no answering call greeted him.

"This is Jess Whaley," he shouted then. "Ever'thing all right in there?" A faint mocking echo was his only answer.

Uneasiness gripping him like an unseen hand, Jess slid from the saddle and moved forward, a six-foot, wary shadow in the semi-darkness. The front door of the three-room frame house stood slightly ajar. With quaking heart—for this was Ann's bedroom—Jess kicked the door in and waited, hand on his gun. Still no sound.

"Ann," he called huskily. "Ann, where are you?" and he went through the door at a half crouch.

Another minute ticked off in ominous silence. Then Jess struck a match on his boot sole and held it high. The room was in confusion; covers thrown back hastily from a home-made couch, a small table overturned, a chair tilted drunkenly against the wall. Jess' mouth went dry. He picked up a half-burned candle and lit it. "Ann—Ben—

Sam—" he called desperately, turning toward the other bedroom.

A muffled sound wheeled him around toward the lean-to-kitchen. Putting down the candle, he advanced cautiously, gun in hand. Again he heard that muffled sound, as if someone were trying to speak. Snatching up the candle, he hastened forward. In a corner of the kitchen he found Ann, bound and gagged, her blue eyes enormous with terror, her hair tumbled about her shoulders like copper shavings.

With a smothered oath, Jess tore the gag from the girl's lips, lifted her to her feet.

"Are you all right?" he demanded, slashing the thongs that bound her hands and feet.

"Yes," she whispered hoarsely. "I'm all right. It's Sam—they took him away, Jess; they're going to hang him for a horse thief. You know he never stole any horses. All the horses he had were wild ones that he had caught and gentled—they turned them all loose—"

"That's only an excuse," snapped Jess. "But why did they tie you up—an' where is your father?"

"Pa went to town for wire to fence our land, or I guess they would have taken him, too. I fought them, tried to get to the shotgun—that's why they tied me."

"Did you recognize any of them?"

SHE SHOOK her head. "Their faces were covered. Only four came into the house, but I know it was Newt Bascomb who gave the orders, though he tried to change his voice. Oh, Jess, can't we do something?"

"I'm goin' to try my best honey," he took her in his arms, held her close for an instant, then released her and strode toward the door.

"Wait, I'm going with you," she cried. "Wait till I get dressed—she was already beginning to untie the belt of the heavy robe she had donned when the cattlemen rode into the yard. "I can handle Pa's shotgun."

"I reckon they took the gun," Whaley told her dryly. "I don't see it. Anyway, Sadie Wilson needs you. They took Fred, too, an' burned her house with just about ever'thing she had inside. You go over an' get her—" He broke off as another horseman dashed into the yard. It was Art Cardiff, middle-aged, wiry little cowboy who had turned nester, the same as Jess.

"Saw the fire an' come-runnin'," he burst out.

Jess told him they were too late to save the Wilson house, but they might save Fred and Sam if they hurried.

A mile from the house they met Wyn Rollins, nighthawk for the Rafter O—Jim Owens' spread. He too, was on his way to the fire, but joined Jess and Cardiff when he heard what had happened. A little farther on they were joined by Si Freeman, who had a claim over near Garnet Springs.

Day was beginning to break now, and they had no trouble in following the trail left by the raiders.

"They're headin' for 'Rustler's Oak' or I miss my guess," volunteered Wyn, gray eyes cold in the morning light. The others nodded silently, each busy with his own bitter reflections.

A couple of hundred yards from the tree, dubbed 'Rustler's Oak' because a number of cattle rustlers had been hanged to its spreading and slipped forward under cover of brush. When in sight of the great oak they stopped, held still in a grip of horror at the scene before them.

The lynchers, feeling perfectly secure, had removed their masks and stood in a circle under a tree, laughing and joking as if on a lark. Newt Bascomb, squat, red-haired, and his foreman, Pite Hendrix, dark, vulture-beaked, seemed to be in charge of the ceremonies. Slick Matson, Dee Hardin and Muff Preston—the three imported gunmen stood about—flanked by several Mexican punchers. And, in the midst of the motley group, young Sam Edwards, just turned seventeen, and

Fred King, middle-aged, thin-shouldered school-teacher farmer, sat their horses, hands tied at their backs. Across the chest of each condemned man was a huge placard and, although he was too far away to read the black lettering, Jess knew it would be a warning to nesters. Ropes around the mounted men's necks had already been made fast to a spreading limb.

AFTER THE first shock of discovery, Whaley clenched his gun with grim determination and moved forward. His companions followed. But Bascomb had posted two of his crew for just such an emergency; before the nesters were within pistol range, a rifle cracked. Instantly the men around the tree scurried for cover—all except Newt and Nate. They had no intention of losing thir prisoners. So, while the others covered them from the attackers, who were still too far away for accurate pistol shooting, Newt and Pite lashed the horses from under the doomed men. Then they, too, joined in the battle.

Finding their handguns no match for the cattlemen's rifles, and themselves outnumbered about three to one, the nesters gradually gave ground. But they did not quit until Wyn received a wound in the fleshy part of the thigh, from which he was bleeding badly, and Si Freeman's face was covered with blood from a scalp wound.

At the forks of the road the men separated. Art Cardiff rode on to town to report the lynching to Sheriff Gray. Jess rode with the wounded to the Edwards place.

Ann and Sadie King, whom Ann had brought over with her few possessions, put aside their own grief while they dressed the wounds of the men who had tried to help them.

"Reckon we might as well a' fought until we cashed in," Si told Wyn and Jess after the women had gone out. "This country won't be healthy for us after today."

"Not with Newt Bascomb wantin' this valley bad enough to hang innocent people to get it," Wyn agreed. "Me, I got a feelin' we're gonna need plenty luck."

"Well, I'm not runnin'," Jess declared. "I filed on that quarter section accordin' to rules an' regulations—an' nobody's runnin' me off it!"

"There's lots o' land," mourned Si. "But a feller can only use about six feet by three in the end—"

"Aw, quit your gripin'," scoffed Wyn. "We're still alive—an' where there's gunpowder there's hope."

"Today's business will lose plenty friends for the cattlemen," prophesied Jess. "Even some of the decent ranchers—like your boss, Wynn—won't hold with murder. When we tell what we saw—" He broke off as Ann came into the room, eyes still red from weeping.

"Pa's coming," she announced quietly.

A minute later a lathered horse pounded into the yard and a tall, stoop-shouldered man with blond hair and drooping blond mustache bounded up the rickety steps. Ann ran to meet him and he swept her into a long, bony-armed embrace. For several minutes she sobbed against his chest. Then, as her sobs subsided, he pushed her gently from him and turned to the men, who watched with sympathetic faces.

"Where's the sheriff?" Si muttered.

"He's gone after Bascomb an' his murderers," gritted Edwards, blue eyes bleak with grief and anger. "I wanted to go along, but he wouldn't let me. So I left my wagon an' hurried on home. He'll be out later—with the coroner—"

NESTERS from outlying sections arrived later in the day, seething with wrath at news of the hangings. Some wanted to arm and ride for the Boxed B at once, but Jess counseled patience. The sheriff had already gone to arrest the lynchers. And nobody could dispute that Sheriff Gray was a square

[*Turn To Page* 82]

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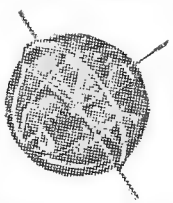

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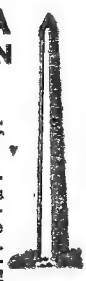

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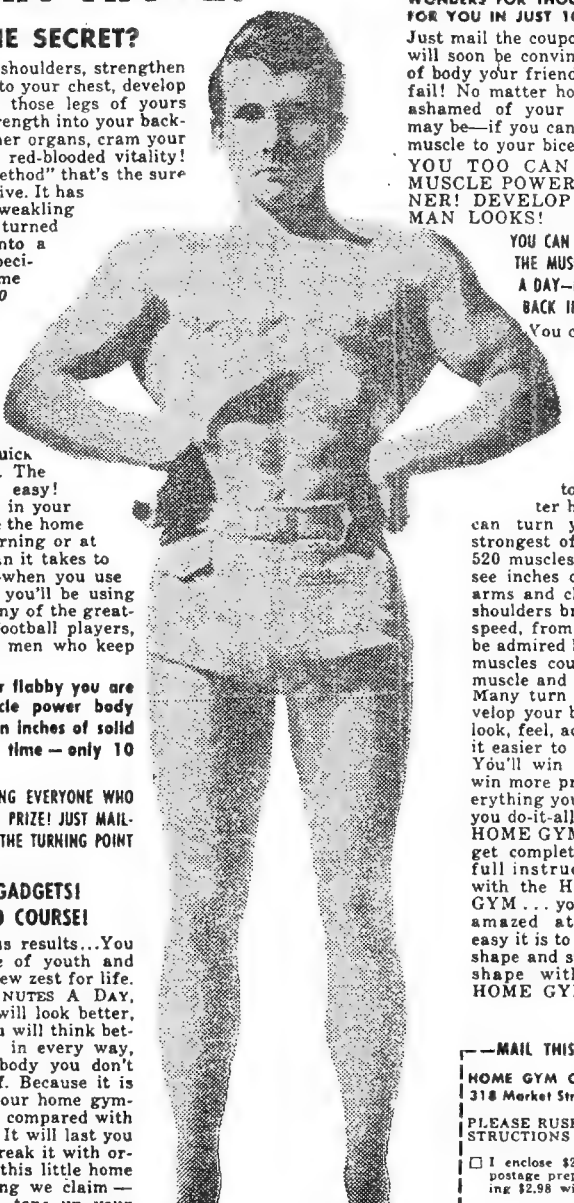

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MONEY BACK GUARANTEE!

shooter, even though disliking the nesters himself. He would uphold the law with his life, if need be. Finally the outraged nesters decided to wait.

Late that afternoon Sheriff Gray rode out, accompanied by his brother-in-law, gray haired, near-sighted Dr. Luke Shafter, who was also the county coroner.

"Did you arrest the skunks?" the nesters demanded in chorus as the sheriff swung down from his weary mount and wobbled up the steps on short, bowed legs, looking too frail to support his barrel-like body.

"I shore did," he rumbled, voice hoarse with indignation. "An' I locked them in jail. But what good did it do? In less than three hours they were out on bail, laughin' in my face. That's the work o' that lawyer, Vine. He's known all over the county as 'crooks' friend', an' I reckon the title fits him like a glove. But if he an' Bascomb think they can make a monkey out o' me they shore got another thought comin'—"

"Thought maybe Art Crowley would be ridin' out with you," Jess said, as the sheriff ended his tirade on Bascomb and Hipplewhite.

The lawman's busy brows jerked together in a deep-furrowed frown. "You mean he ain't been here? Why, he left town right after talkin' to me—right after Ike rode out. Reckon he went on home if he didn't come here."

"That's funny," mused Jess. "He was to come back by here."

"Reckon I'll mosey over to his place," the sheriff muttered, trying to hide his uneasiness.

"I'll ride along with you," Whaley volunteered.

When they came in sight of the cowboy's claim shack, his horse was standing at the corral gate, a bulky shape draped over the saddle. Jess and the sheriff looked at each other and spurred their mounts to a gallop. But all they could do for Art Cardiff was to unrope his body from the saddle and carry it inside. He had been shot between the shoulder blades with a high-powered rifle.

"That's one witness who won't appear agin' the cattlemen," said the sheriff, with a significant look at Jess.

Whaley nodded silently.

The next day they buried the three murdered men on a slope overlooking the Edwards homestead. And that night the nesters held a meeting to discuss what course of action they should take. Ike Edwards, taut-faced and bitter-eyed, was all for meting out speedy punishment to the murderers of his son and neighbors, and most of the settlers sided him. But again Jess pleaded with them to wait, to let the law handle the case. With three witnesses to the lynching the cattlemen couldn't possibly wriggle out this time, even with a slick lawyer to help them.

"Who said there'd be three witnesses?" cut in somebody harshly. "There was *four* you know."

"I reckon some of us will be around," Jess answered quietly. "If the law turns 'em loose, that will be time enough for us to do somethin'. I move we wait." In the end the others agreed.

After the meeting Jess rode with Si and Wyn—whose wounds were healing nicely—to his claim.

"You fellers sure better grow eyes in the back o' your heads if you expect to live to testify agin' them cattlemen," warned Ike Edwards as they rode away.

"We'll testify," Whaley promised, with more conviction in his voice then was in his heart, for he was remembering that gaping hole in Art Cardiff's back.

THE NEXT morning, as Jess prepared breakfast for himself and his companions at the fireplace in one end of his shack, Wyn, still wobbly from his leg wound, stepped from the front door and started for the corral. Before

[*Turn To Page* 84]

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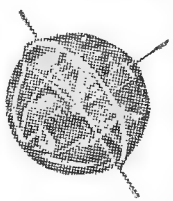

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he had taken ten steps a rifle cracked from a brush-covered hillside a hundred yards away and Wyn fell.

Jess snatched up his rifle and ran from the house. Si followed, sixshooter in hand. But the assassin had evidently been satisfied with his work; at least no more shots came.

"I reckon that bullet had my name on it," Jess said dryly, as they carried Wyn into the house. "Them coyotes didn't know I had company."

Later they found the place where the sharpshooter had stood, waiting for somebody to come out of the door. They found where his horse had been tied to a bush a few yards away, but that was all. It was impossible to follow the animal's tracks on the rocky soil.

"Well, that leaves you an' me," Whaley said with a sober glance at Si as they rode back to the house. "Looks like they shore don't aim to have any witnesses—"

Si nodded, his eyes not meeting Jess'. "Guess I'll drift on over to my place," he mumbled through ashen lips. And Jess knew, somehow, that he would keep right on drifting. Not that he blamed Si too much; but a fellow could never run away from his own conscience.

But Si Freeman had seen too much for Bascomb to allow him to leave the country. Several days after he parted from Whaley, his body was found in lonely Coyote Canyon, his back pierced by a rifle bullet. His horse had been shot, too, and the pitiful contents of his war bag scattered by marauding coyotes.

"Oh, Jess, you *must* leave," sobbed Ann after they had returned from the new-made graves on the slope—five in less than a week. "I'll go with you—anywhere. If you stay they'll kill you, too. You're the last witness—"

"I appreciate your offer, Ann," he said quietly. "But no woman could respect a man who'd run away from his duty—an' I want my wife to respect me. Anyway, Si was runnin' away, an' see what happened? But don't worry about me; I've done sprouted eyes in the back o' my head, like your Pa advised—" his slow grin eased the fear

[*Turn To Page* 86]

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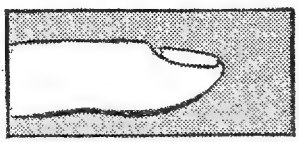

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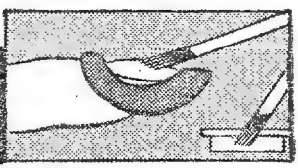

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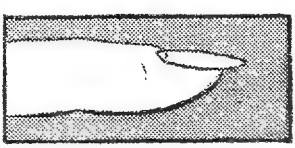

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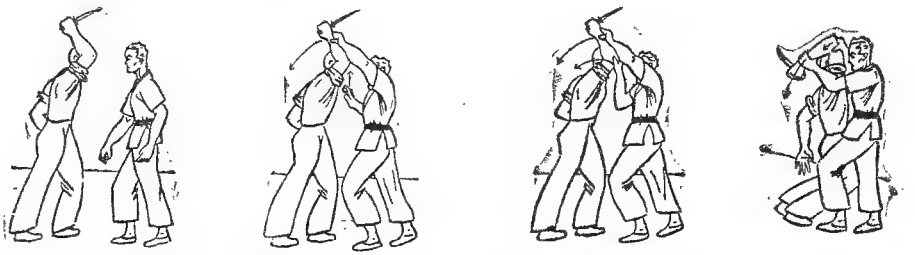

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in the girl's eyes, brought a tender smile to her lips.

"That's better," he said, eyes twinkling. "Now I'm ridin' in for a palaver with Sheriff Gray. He sent word he wanted to see me. But I'll be back—"

IN TOWN, he found the old sheriff in his cubbyhole of an office in the courthouse, booted feet resting on his spur-scarred desk, the worry furrow between his blue eyes deeper than u .al.

"You sent for me?" Whaley asked, pushing into the office.

The sheriff nodded and sat there for a full minute, measuring the man before him with keen glance. "Son," he said finally. "I'm about to give you some advice that may sound queer, comin' from the law. But after due consideration it seems the best thing to do."

And, as Whaley stood silent, waiting, the sheriff went on. "I'm advisin' you to go down to the *Palace Bar* an' drink all the redeye you can hold, pick a couple o' fist-fights an' break up as many mirrors an' winders as possible. Do enough damage so's I can throw you in jail an' keep you there till the District Judge gets here to open court. That's the only way I know to keep you alive. You're the last witness—an' don't think they're forgettin' you—" He stopped, the scowl on his seamed face deepening as Jess grinned down at him.

"So you want to lock me up—an' have them shoot me through the bars? No, I'll take my chances in the open—thanks just the same, Sheriff."

"Then you shore better watch your back," the lawman warned.

[*Turn To Page* 88]

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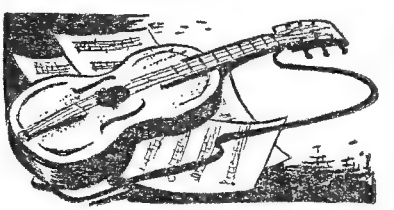
But he couldn't watch back, front and both sides at the same time. And, as he entered Black Canyon on his way home that afternoon he was not alone. For the first time in his life, fear rode in the saddle with him, making him as jumpy as a filly in rattlesnake-infested brush.

Dark, forbidding banks towered on either side of the canyon, completely shutting out the westering sun. A cool, damp wind brought a chill to the cowboy nester's body as he rode tense as a coiled spring, and near the gun at his hip, while the steady clop, clop of his horse's hoofs seemed to beat out the rhythm like a bass drum; "You're the last witness—the last witness—last witness—"

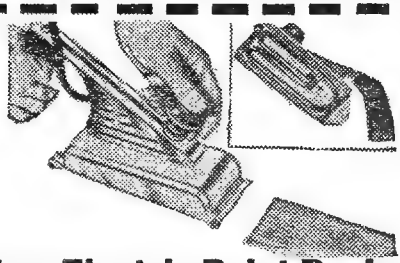
He had reined his horse close to the cliff, keeping as much in the shadows as possible. That, together with the reflection of a sinking sun on a rifle barrel, probably saved his life. For, even as the rifle cracked, Jess threw himself forward on his mount's neck and jabbed home the spurs.



The highstrung horse, unused to the steel, gave a violent lunge and tore down the canyon like a pack of lobos was at his heels. And Whaley clung on, bouncing and rolling, giving the best imitation he could of a wounded man. For the thought had come to him suddenly that if he let the drygulcher think he was critically wounded, he wouldn't bother to shoot again. At least no more shots came, and Jess rode out of the canyon just at dusk and galloped his horse towards the Edwards' place.

[*Turn To Page* 90]

Meridian's NEWEST!



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New, faster SUPER-POWERMET peels old paint, enamel, varnish, shellac clean to base wood grain like cutting butter with a hot knife. Super-hot tube softens paint electrically. Removes up to 12 layers fast as 3½ square feet per minute. A heavy-duty professional-type tool. Ends scraping, cutting, burning, sanding, chemicals. Just plug into any 110-120 volts AC or 600 Watts DC outlet and allow to heat to 1200 degrees in less than two minutes. Then put it to work on interior or exterior regular or irregular surfaces, like woodwork, clapboards, floors, cupboards, doors, furniture, boats and see it peel off paint like magic. Can be used for removing wall paper, paint from plastered walls, asphalt tile from floors. Heating surface measures 3x7 inches. Complete with 8 foot U.L. approved heater cord. ONLY $11.98 postpaid. If C.O.D., send $2.00 deposit, balance plus postage charges.

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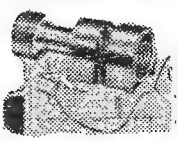

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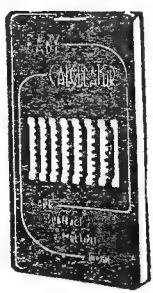

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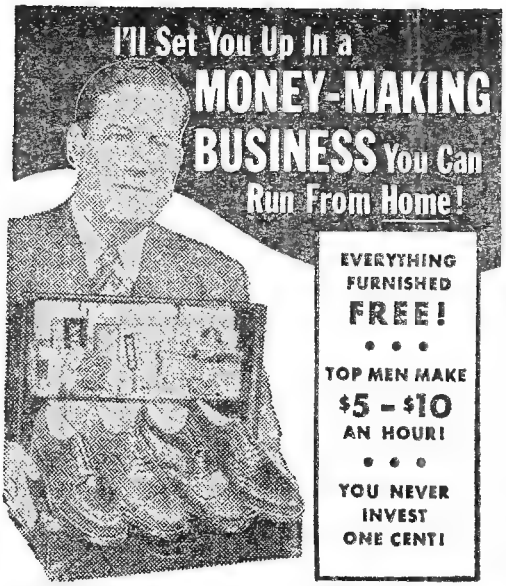

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Ann and her father, hearing his horse, ran out to meet him.

"Jess, are you all right?" Ann cried as he slid the horse to a stop.

"No, you've got a dead man on your hands," he answered with a little chuckle. And, as they gasped their bewilderment, he went on. "Mr. Edwards, I want you to ride into town an' tell Sheriff Gray that I was waylaid in Black Canyon an' shot. I reached your place alive, but passed on a few minutes later. Have him circulate that story around, then ride out here with the coroner to view the remains—. Oh yeah, you better order a coffin while you're about it, too. I want me a real nice funeral—"

"Jess Whaley, what are you up to?" scolded Ann.

Then he told them what had happened.

"Don't you see they'll kill you if you stick around?" cried the distressed girl.

"They can't kill me if I'm already dead an' buried," he argued. "You do like I said, Mr. Edwards."

BASCOMB and Pite Hendrix, his foreman, were drinking in the *Palace Bar* when Ike Edwards rode in on a lathered horse to tell the sheriff that Jess Whaley had been killed. Soon the whole town was a-buzz with the news

[*Turn To Page* 92]

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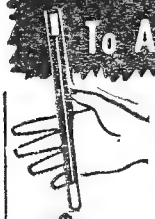

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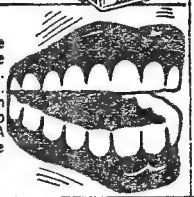

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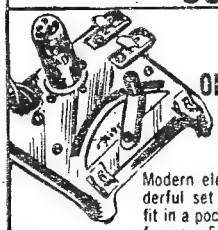

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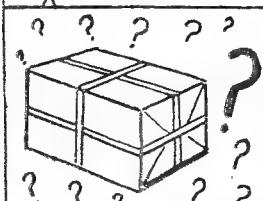

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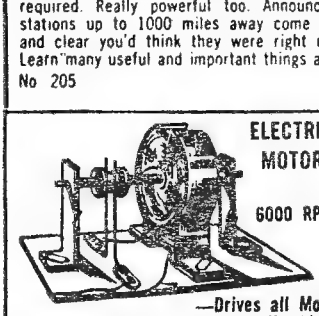

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HOLLYWOOD TUNESMITHS

that the last witness had been wiped out. And, though they dared not show any feeling in the matter, most respectable citizens were awed and frightened that a few men could hold the lives of the community in the hollow of their gun-palmed hands. But at the *Palace Bar,* a kind of jubilation went on as other members of the Boxed B joined Bascomb and his foreman. When the sheriff questioned them they were boldly defiant, each proving an alibi by one or more of his friends. The sheriff put on a good act himself, pretending disgust as he stamped from the saloon, the jeering laughs of the cowmen following him.

Jess Whaley's funeral the following day was indeed a solemn occasion. Nester women clustered about the open grave, a haunting fear for their own men staring from their eyes, as the preacher read a few words over the closed coffin. Sadie King, in somber widow's weeds, tried to comfort the grieving Ann. The men were hard-faced and silent as they took turns shoveling dirt into the grave.

From his place of concealment in the Edwards' barn, Jess Whaley watched it all through a pair of binoculars and grinned his satisfaction.

Several days later a gaunt, hungry-looking Mexican, his black, unkept hair straggling from beneath a huge peaked sombrero, mahogany-stained face covered with a stubble of black beard, took up his duties as man-of-all-work on the Edwards farm. Nobody paid much attention to him, knowing that Ike would be shorthanded, now that young Sam was gone. But, had they noticed, even Whaley's best friends would not have recognized him. He proved that the day he rode into town on the wagon with Ike.

While the homesteader attended to some business, Jess hunkered against the wall in front of the *Palace Bar,* smoking corn husk cigarets. John Ward and Clem Bates, two men who had known him for years passed him

without a second glance. Then Sheriff Gray, noted for his memory of faces, stilted past. A few feet away he paused, turned back, searching Jess's face with piercing eyes.

"Don't believe I've seen you around, Amigo," he said in a friendly drawl. "What's your name?"

Whaley got to his feet, brown face slit in a white-toothed grin. "Pasqual Fernando de Rodriguez." he said, holding back a chuckle. "It is for the Senor Edwards I have work—"

The sheriff caught back an exclamation of amazement. No telling who might be watching or listening. "The Senor Edwards is a good hombre," he said, straight-faced. "You better stay with him." And, with eyes twinkling under the shadow of his battered John B., he moved on towards the courthouse.

TWO WEEKS later, Judge Clayton Chandler of the District Court arrived and court convened. The judge was a tall, silver-haired man with a pointed white goatee and steel gray eyes that seemed to look right through a man and see what lay inside. Even as Sheriff Gray, he was noted for his fairness, as well as his shrewdness.

[*Turn Page*]

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DOUBLE ACTION WESTERN

On court day Jess rode into town in the wagon with Ike, Ann and Sadie King, who was staying with Edwards family until she could rebuild her shack. After Ike and the women alighted, Whaley took care of the team, then made his way to the courthouse and hunkered down in a secluded corner, where he could watch and listen.

The courtroom was already filled with curious spectators, both cattlemen and nesters, as well as town people. A few small cases were disposed of quickly. Then the case of the State of Texas versus Newton Bascomb, et al, was called.

A breath of excitement ran through the crowded room as Bascomb swaggered forward, followed by his cohorts.

Attorney Vine, hollow-chested, sallow-faced, his expression was more that of a predatory animal than a human, smiled thinly as he motioned Bascomb and his men to seats at the long counsel table. Bascomb was grinning arrogantly, his red hair standing up like the quills of an angry porcupine on his massive head. Pite Hendrix followed closely, towering over his boss like a telephone pole over a fence post, his snake like eyes raking the courtroom with a disdainful glance. Following Pite was Slick Matson, thick lips twisted in a derisive leer, Dee Hardin, blond, cruel-eyed giant, and Muff Pres-

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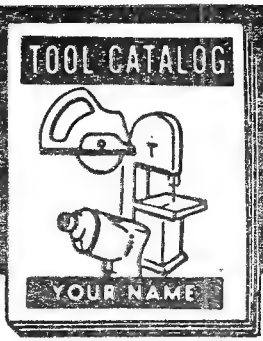
Just off the Press!



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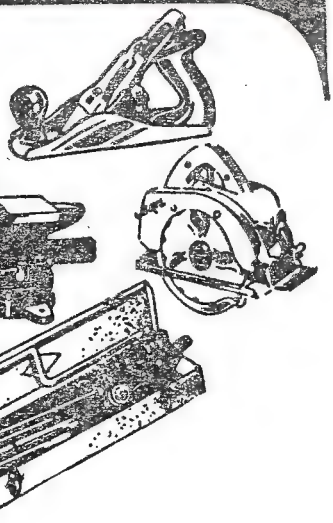

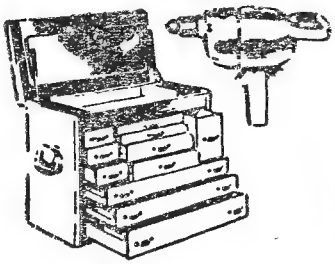

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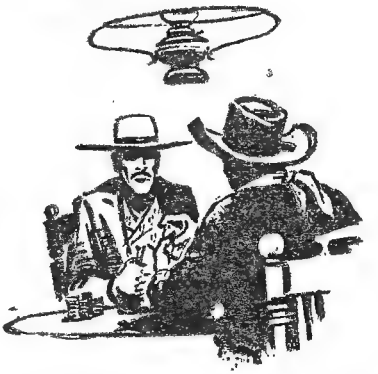
ton, small, wiry—gunmen all. Behind them several Mexican punchers clustered, bravo hombres with broad grins, important and secure in the power of their master.



The sheriff was the first on the witness stand. He repeated what Art Cardiff had told him—namely that Cardiff and three others had witnessed the lynching of Fred King and Sam Edwards by Newt Bascomb and the other men on trial with him. But Art Cardiff had failed to sign a sworn statement, as had Si Freeman, Wyn Rollins and Jess Whaley.

Attorney Vine was on his feet in an instant, shouting that this was only hearsay testimony and should be stricken from the record. And Judge Chandler had to grant his request. Sheriff Gray looked chagrined. The defendants laughed outright.

Next Mrs. King was called to the stand. She could not swear definitely as to the identity of the lynchers, because their faces had been covered, but she had seen a Boxed B brand on one of the horses. But attorney Vine was quick to point out that a man couldn't be responsible for everybody who rode his brand.

Ann's testimony, that she had recognized Bascomb's voice, was likewise discredited by Vine, who contended that an excited woman, already hating Bascomb, might easily bring herself to mistake another voice for his. Some members of the jury, that had been miraculously made up of the towns-

[*Turn To Page* 98]

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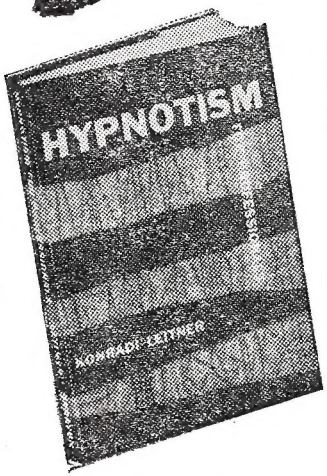

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people to avoid any partialities, nodded gravely. Again the cattlemen gloated openly.

THEN THE state called its final witness—Pasqual Fernando de Rodriguez. The defense attorney jerked around in surprise; Bascomb and his henchmen stared with puzzled frowns as a Mexican got up from the corner and shuffled forward on worn sandals, peaked sombrero held before him in nervous hands, black hair straggling around a thin face, covered with several weeks' growth of beard. He sat down in the witness chair, shoulders hunched forward dejectedly under a coarse, homespun cotton shirt, his eyes lowered as if fearing to meet those of the cattlemen.

"Your name?" queried the judge.

The witness glanced briefly at that dignitary, then his eyes shifted to Newt Bascomb at the counsel table. "Jess Whaley, Your Honor," he answered firmly.

Had a stick of dynamite exploded in the courtroom it could have caused no more consternation. Bascomb leaped to his feet, eyes staring. "What the devil—?" he rasped, pudgy hand groping for the hideout gun at his shoulder. Pite and the gunmen, mouthing surprised curses, were on their feet also, and going for their hideout guns, when Jess's sombrero dropped to the floor and they found themselves looking into the muzzles of two six-shooters in hands that had gone rock-steady.

"Don't anybody make a move," he warned in a cold, dry voice, "or it'll be your last." And, as the gunmen froze, Jess turned to Bascomb. "Yes, Jess Whaley," he repeated, his eyes like augurs drilling into the startled ones of the cattleman. "The last witness—the one you failed to murder."

The cornered men glanced swiftly about. The sheriff stood on the other side of the judge, his gun leveled on the punchers, whose grins had vanished. On each side of the courtroom a deputy stood with a sawed-off shotgun, to quell any assistance from sympathetic friends among the spectators. But, after the first gasps of amazement—for only the Edwards family, the sheriff and the coroner had been in on the hoax—all was quiet. As Jess told his story, you could have heard a cigaret paper drop. Even lawyer Vine was silenced, crushed by evidence he could not combat.

The jury reached a verdict in five minutes. "*Guilty*!" they reported after the first ballot.

In passing sentence Judge Chandler said, in part: "The government has opened this land for settlement. Whether that is right or wrong is not for me to say—it is the law. And any cattleman, or nester, convicted of taking the law into his own hands need expect no sympathy from this court—" Then he sentenced the lynchers to death by hanging.

For a minute Bascomb and his men—who had been disarmed—stood as if stunned, unable to believe the thing that had befallen them. Then Bascomb turned on Pite, began berating him for his failure to kill Whaley.

When it was all over, Jess found himself in a small anteroom with Ann, Sadie King, and several others. He had his arm around Ann, who was laughing and crying at the same time.

"Oh, Jess, I'm so glad it's all over," she whispered. "I've been living in terrible suspense—"

Jess bent to kiss her, but at that moment, Judge Chandler came into the room.

"As soon as I get into some more clothes an' find a barber shop I'd like to get you to pass another sentence, Judge," he said, grinning.

Judge Chandler's eyes were twinkling. "Well, I'll have to think the case over," he drawled in his best court manner. "But, according to the evidence at hand, I think I'll make this one a life sentence."

★

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